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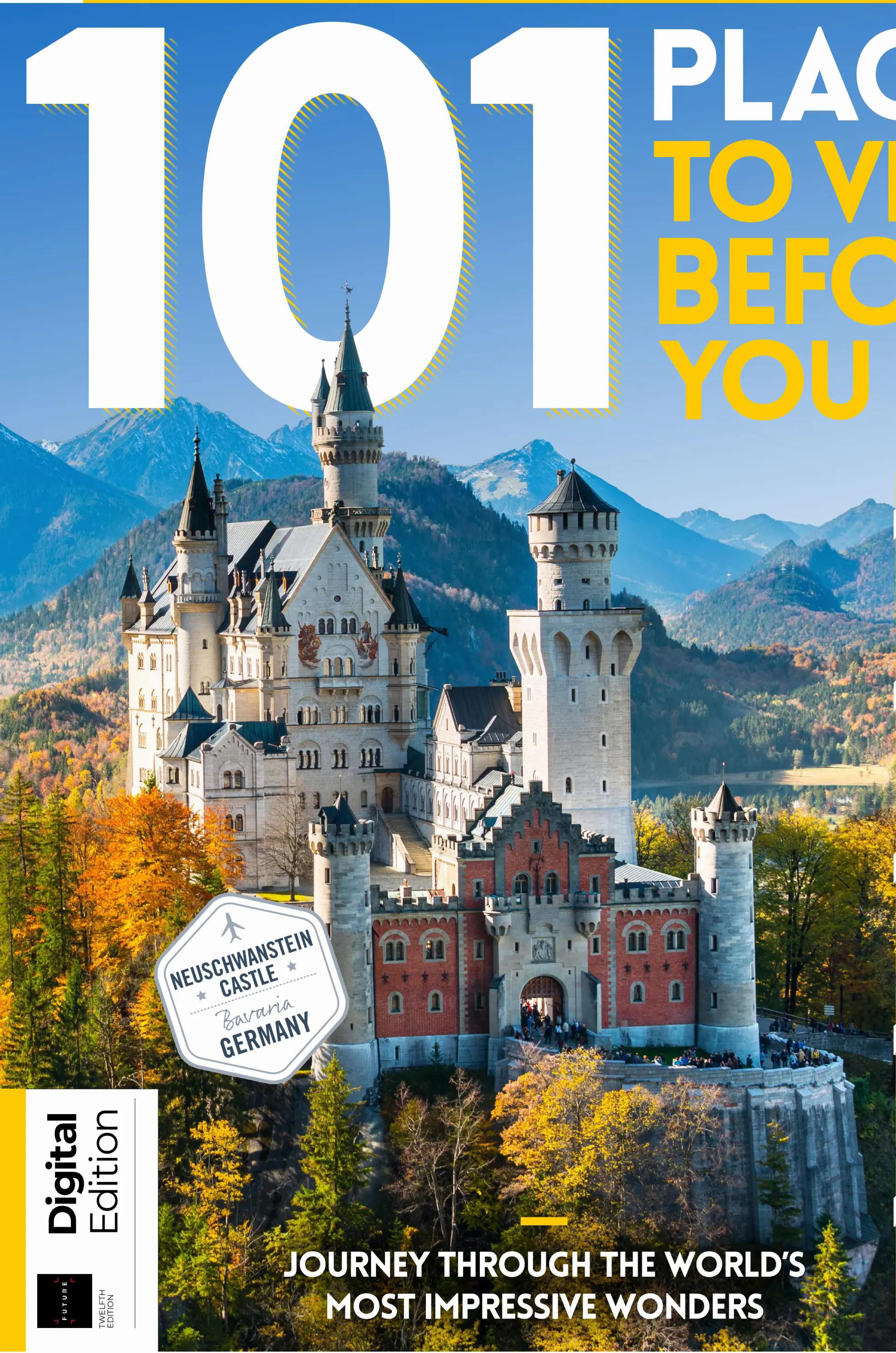
101 PLACES TO VISIT BEFORE YOU DIE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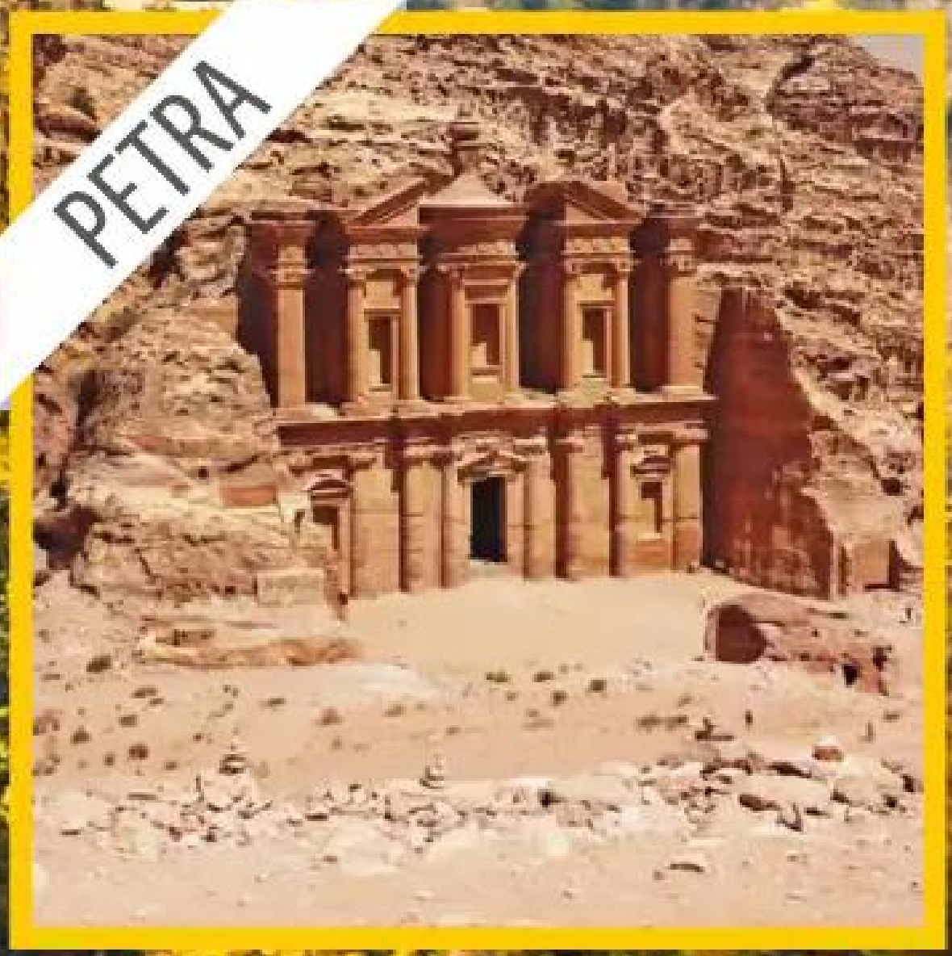
GERMANY

TBILISI

BORA BORA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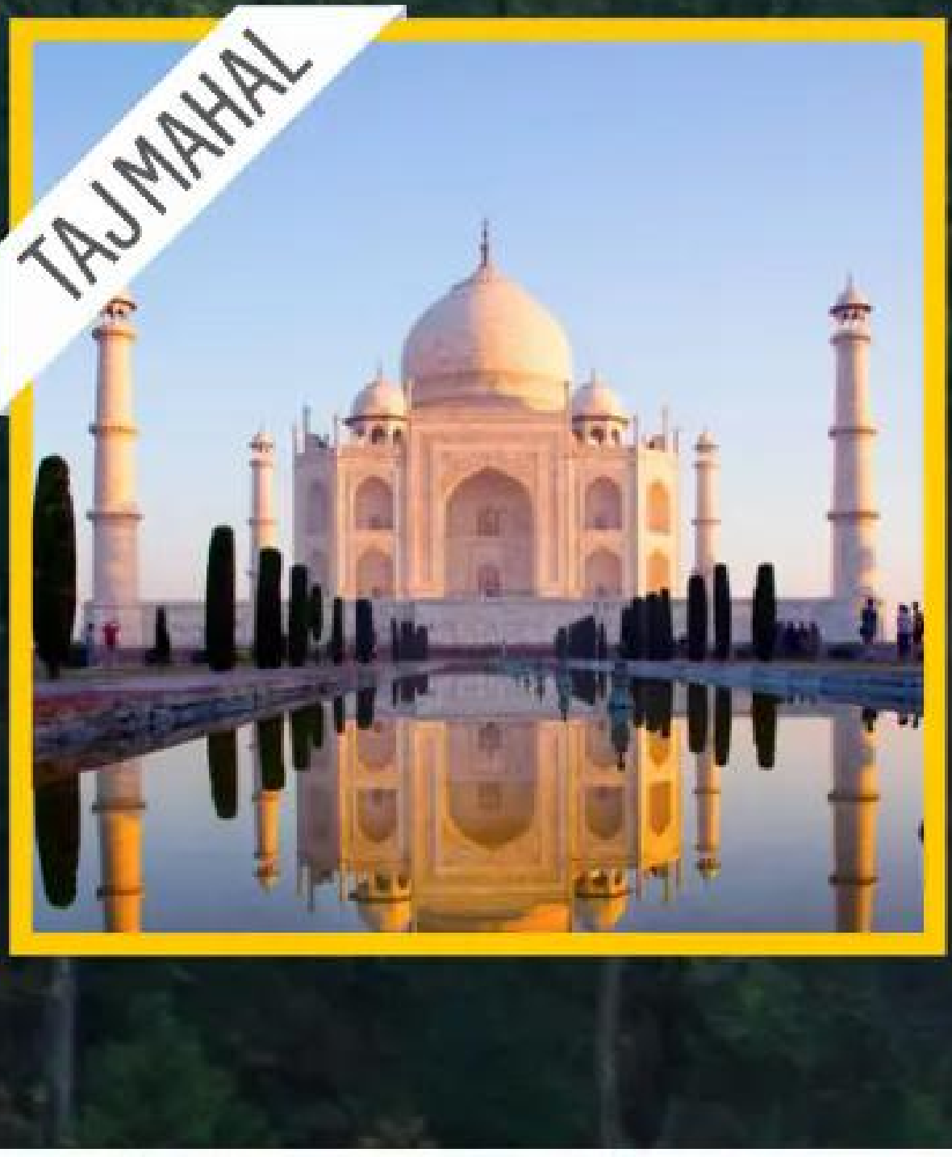
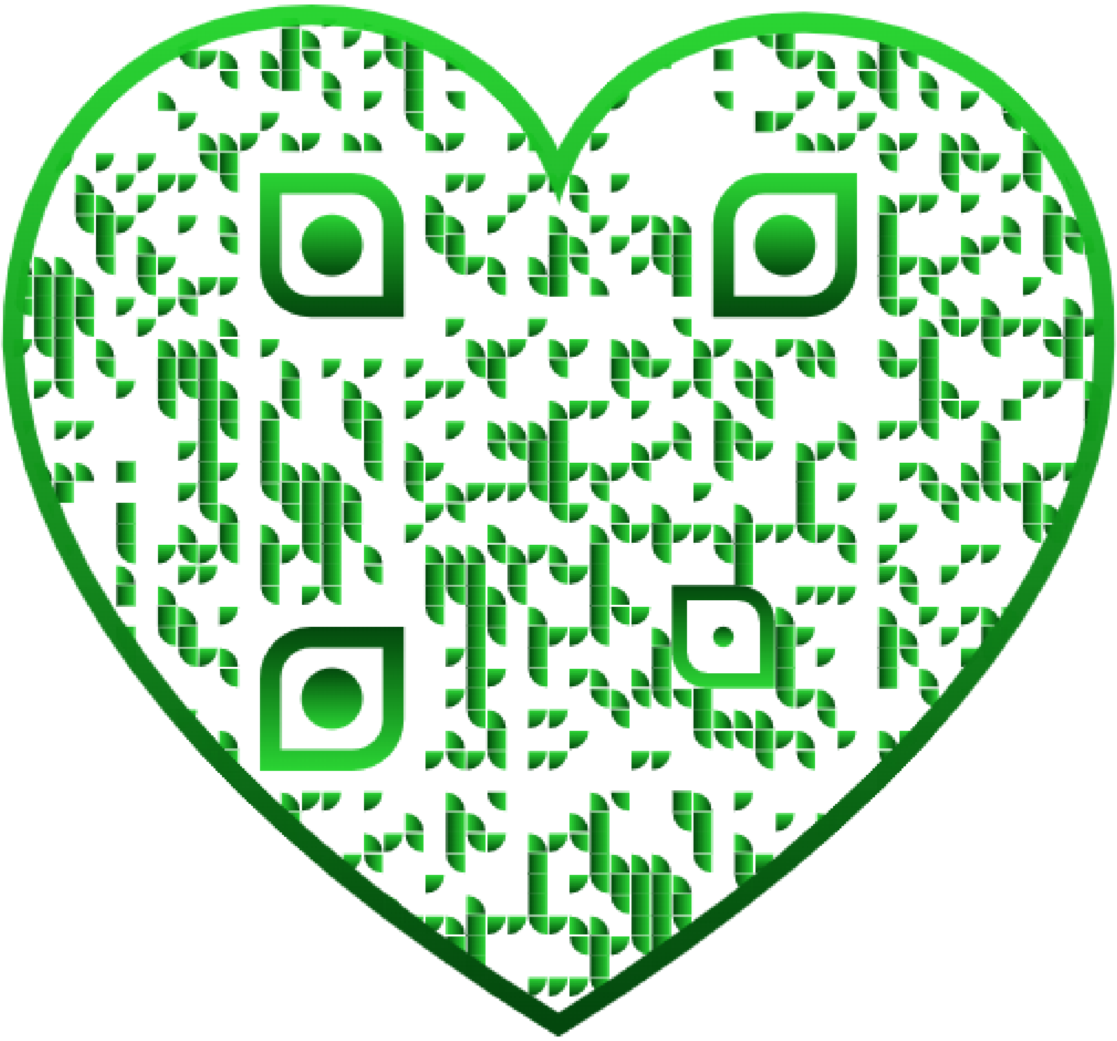

TAJ MAHAL

JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD'S
MOST IMPRESSIVE WONDERS

Digital Edition

FUTURE
TWELFTH EDITION



WELCOME TO

101 PLACES TO VISIT BEFORE YOU DIE

Bringing some of the world's most incredible places to life, this book is the ultimate travel companion for anyone who loves to explore the world. From bucket-list favourites to places you didn't even know existed, your line-up of must-visit destinations is about to get a whole lot bigger!

Whether you're looking to experience awe-inspiring natural wonders or architectural marvels; perhaps you want to immerse yourself in local culture, get lost in a big city or relax on an idyllic beach – the world is vast and there are millions of places just waiting to be explored.

The sheer number can make travel-planning a daunting experience in itself, so we've compiled a list of 101 places that you simply must visit before departing this wonderful planet. Sectioned by continent so you can embark on your own round-the-world journey through the pages of this book, you'll find everything from the beautiful to the bizarre, so there really is something for everyone. Although numbered, it's important to point out that the places are by no means ranked, because we believe each experience is subjective and unique to the individual. So, what are you waiting for? Sit back, relax and start planning your next adventure!

DISCLAIMER

While specific locations, activities and websites are referenced within the book and information, prices and availability of these were correct at the time of original publication, these may have changed since. Therefore this book should be used as a source of inspiration only.

Travel advice and guidelines are constantly updated following events such as natural disasters and armed conflicts.Where you see this icon, most governments strongly advise against all travel to these destinations. Always check the current travel guidelines when planning a trip, and follow any local restrictions at your destination.

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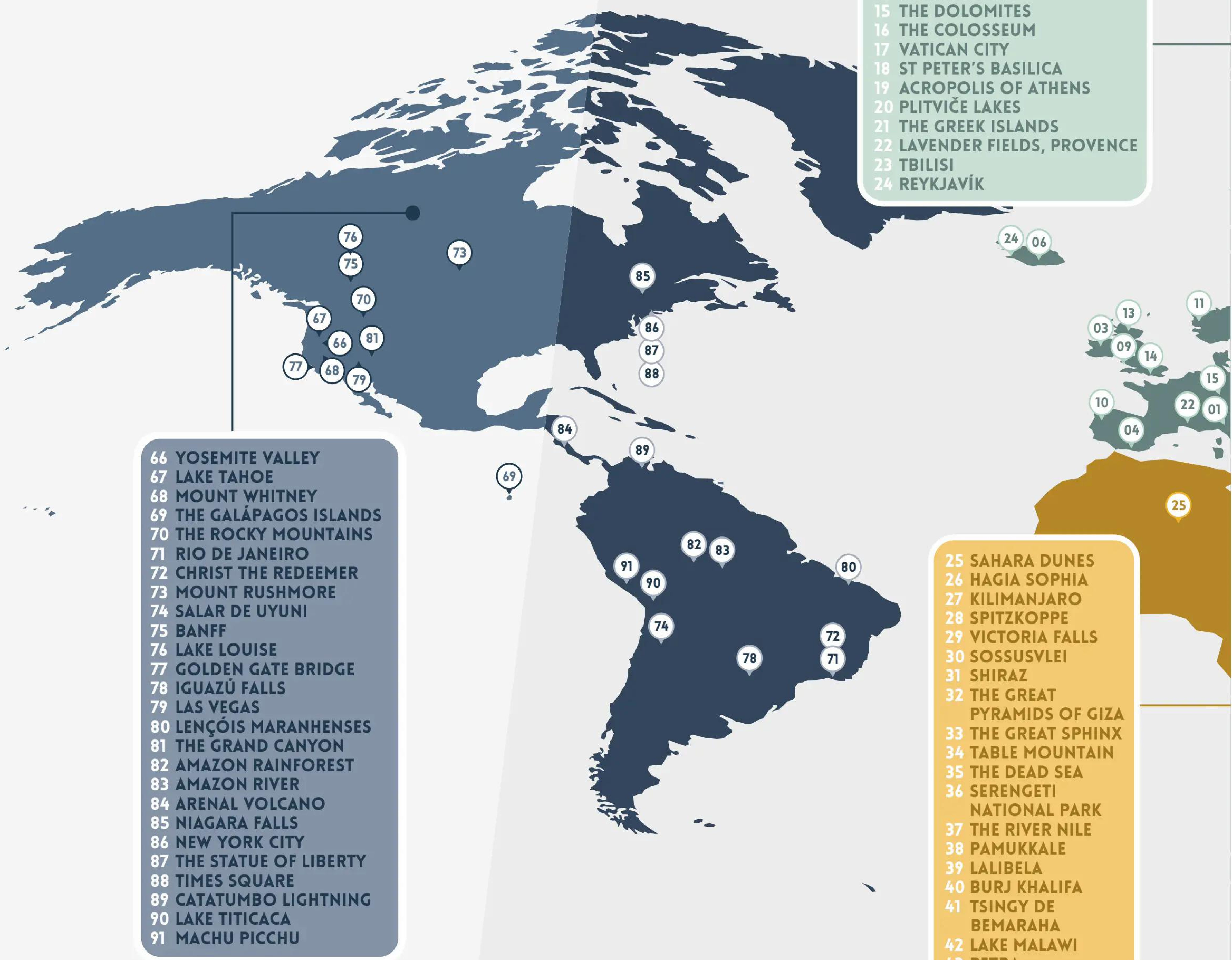

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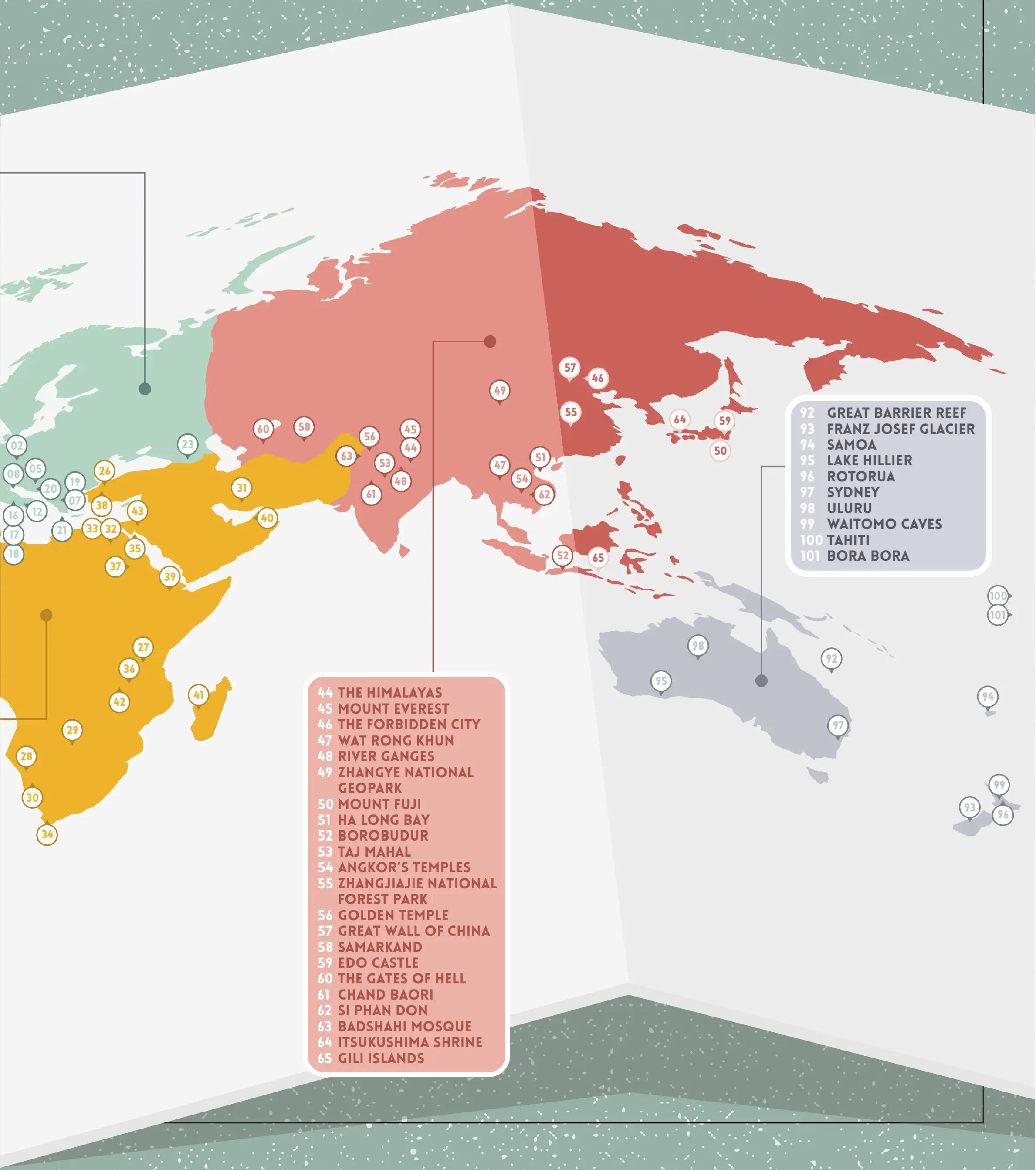
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01 THE ITALIAN LAKES

Visit north Italy's stunning lakes – the perfect place for a tranquil holiday

Resting at the foothills of the Alps, right at the northern tip of Italy at the country's border with Switzerland, you can find some of the most beautiful places in the world. Italy's lakes are nothing short of breathtaking, with the sun glinting off the crests of small waves, and the peaks of Europe's most famous mountain range providing a dramatic backdrop.

It's perhaps best to start with arguably the most famous lake that Italy offers: Lake Como. Attracting tourists and celebrities alike, it's difficult to see why you wouldn't want to visit when you understand what it has on offer. Surrounded by gorgeous scenery in the way of mountains and wooded hills, the shores are home to exquisite villas and small, traditional Italian towns. Making its home just miles from the Swiss border, the lake boasts 146 square kilometres (56 square miles) of tranquil water.

The city of Como lies at one of the bottom tips of the upside-down Y-shaped lake, and it's a wonderful place to spend an afternoon or even a whole day. The capital of a region famous for silk products, it's the perfect place to buy those gifts (or even a little something for yourself) before heading to the historic heart of the city. There, you can see the magnificent 15th-century duomo and grab a bite to eat. Then head to the small village of Brunate on a cable car, getting a magnificent view of the lake from above on the way. Make sure you check out the other towns and villages on your trip, too – each one has its own character and stunning buildings just waiting to be uncovered.

If you head west from Lake Como, pass through the stunning Swiss town of Lugano and make your way back into Italy, you'll stumble across Lake Maggiore (pronounced Mah-jor-ay). While this body of water is shared with Switzerland, it is still Italy's second largest lake and absolutely worth a visit. Sitting at a crossroads between different communities, it's the ideal place to discover the Swiss, Lombard and Piedmontese history and traditions. The shores and hills also provide the opportunity for mountain biking and walking, with routes that host breathtaking views and beautiful islands. Isola Bella, for instance, is home to a stunning 17th-century palace.

Heading further west, you'll come across Lake Orta. Smaller than the other lakes at only 18.2 square kilometres (seven square miles), Orta is certainly no less beautiful. Perhaps because of its size, Orta isn't frequented by so many tourists, making it the perfect place to spend a romantic break. If you're looking for some culture, the town of Orta San Giulio is the one for you, with its piazza and narrow, cobbled streets.

About halfway between Milan and Venice lies Italy's biggest lake, Garda, and it is simply stunning. The calm, blue water is surrounded by olive and lemon groves, and palm and cypress trees, making it seem like a veritable paradise, and there's a boatful of activities that you can do there. If adventure is what you're after, why not have a go at sailing or windsurfing? The

Lake Orta is nestled at the foot of the Alps in northern Italy

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Some travel insurance policies won't cover you if you're doing dangerous water sports, so make sure you check with your provider.

Best time to visit:

April to October

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites:

www.illagomaggiore.com
www.visitgarda.com/en/garda_lake
www.visitlakeiseo.info/en

An aerial view of Sirmione on Lake Garda and its medieval port castle, Scaligero

The town of Riva del Garda on the shore of Lake Garda

Treat yourself to a swim in the beautifully clear water

conditions on Garda are absolutely perfect and there are plenty of companies offering lessons and equipment. If you want to spend more time on the water, you can also try your hand at kite surfing and even diving. Prefer something not quite so active? Check out one of the many beaches and treat yourself to a swim in the beautifully clear water.

When you've had enough of being out on the blue, you can take a cycle ride on one of the many routes surrounding the lake, or go for a scenic walk, or to really get your adrenaline pumping, you can have a go at rock climbing. But your activities aren't limited to the ground – why not go paragliding and see Lake Garda and its beautiful scenery from the air? If you're looking for a thrill, you can also take a trip to one of the theme parks nearby.

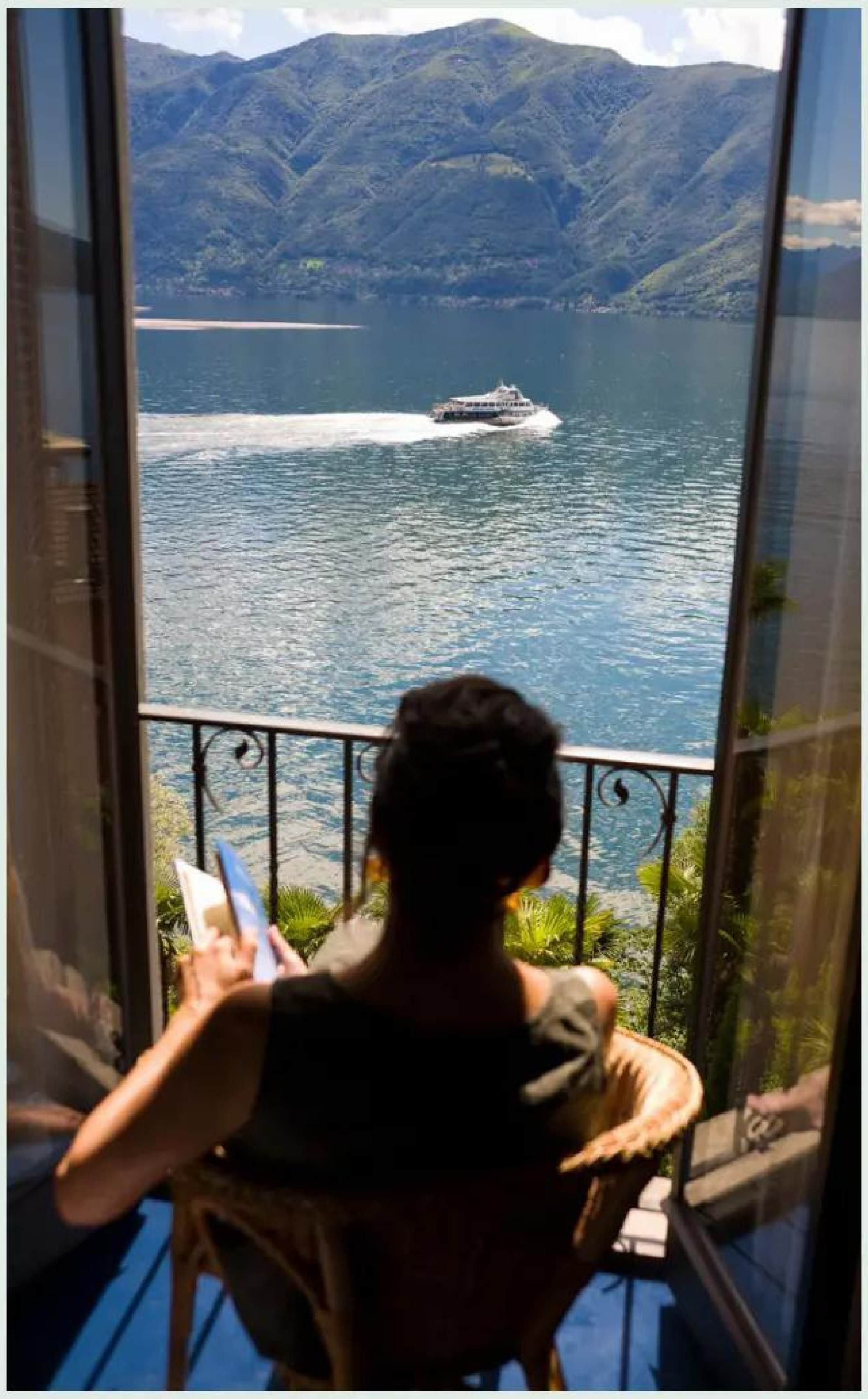
For those looking for something a little more relaxed, check out the golf courses or visit some of the towns and villages overlooking the lake. The town of Riva del Garda, for instance, situated right at the north of Lake Garda, is home to a history museum as well as a medieval belfry that offers stunning views of the water. While exploring Garda, make sure you also take a visit to Sirmione. Known for its thermal springs, the town also has a beautiful medieval port fortress and picturesque Italian churches.

If you're looking for a lake a little closer to Milan, try Lake Iseo, which offers everything that its bigger counterparts do. You can take a boat trip on the lake to see the three islands in the middle, or you can see it all from above with a helicopter ride. Some places around the lake also offer wine tasting – you'd be pushed to find a more beautiful environment to enjoy some fine wines – and kayaking or canoeing at night with the moonlight reflecting on the calm water. If you have a spare day, take a look at the largest island in the middle of Lake Iseo, Monte Isola, to see some real rural Italian villages.

There's also plenty to do for lovers of history. There are churches, chapels, sanctuaries and monasteries littered all around the lake, along with enough museums and art galleries to keep you entertained and educated for days. You can also visit beautiful buildings like the Monument to the Redeemer and the Villa Giuseppe Faccanoni, in addition to fortresses, clock towers and medieval houses.

So, if you're after a relaxing weekend at a calm lakeside resort or an action-packed holiday with water sports, treks and rock climbing galore, the Italian lakes are a must. With glinting blue waters, snow-capped mountains and endless activities, you really can't go wrong.

San Giulio Island in Lake Orta



Where to stay

One of the best things about the Italian lakes is the variety of accommodation that's on offer. For those keen on sleeping under the stars, there are plenty of campsites available – Lake Garda alone has ten sites, so you can wake early and see the sun rise over the water.

If you'd rather have a roof over your head, an option is to stay at one of the many beautiful hotels in the towns surrounding the lakes. No matter which lake you're visiting, you'll be spoilt for choice with establishments to suit every budget.

For something a little more private, there are also many companies that rent out entire villas. This is especially good when you're travelling with a group as you can split the cost between you instead of renting individual hotel rooms. But whatever type of holiday you're after, there's bound to be some accommodation on offer to suit you.

Neuschwanstein's mountain setting is beautiful all year round

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Book your tickets before you go, as visits are often sold out on the day.

Best time to visit:

Mid summer to early autumn

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites:

www.neuschwanstein.de/englisch/palace/index.htm

www.schloesser.bayern.de/englisch/palace/objects/neuschw.htm

en.schwangau.de/sightseeing/neuschwanstein-castle/

02

NEUSCHWANSTEIN CASTLE

The passion project of King Ludwig II, Germany's fairy-tale castle will fulfil all your Disney fantasies

If you think this beautiful castle on a hill seems familiar, that's because it helped to spawn a popular culture icon. Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, Germany, is a maze of turrets, twisting stairways and stained glass, and was one of the primary inspirations for Walt Disney's castle. Unlike the Disney version, the best thing about Neuschwanstein is that it's 100 per cent real, and you're free to explore its lavish rooms and halls – just like Cinderella herself.

Neuschwanstein was built in the late 19th century as a palace for King Ludwig II of Bavaria, an unhappy man with eccentric tastes. Perched on a steep hill in the foothills of the Alps, next to a pristine mountain lake, it's easy to see why he chose this beauty spot for the location of his dream house. He spent a happy childhood in the area, as his parents built the neighbouring Hohenschwangau Castle.

Sadly, the king never got to see his castle completed, as he died during its construction. Some say it was suicide, some say murder – the king mysteriously drowned in a lake. Shortly afterwards, Neuschwanstein was opened to the public in order to raise the money needed to complete it – a fantastic legacy for the king.

Inside the castle's white walls and ornate turrets, the stone floors and arched windows were inspired by the legendary medieval castles of lore, draped with luxurious carpets, tapestries and works of art. On your tour of the castle, you can feast your eyes on a number of spectacular rooms, each decorated in a different style – after all, this was completely the king's fantasy construction, not an austere fortress.

Your first stop will be the sumptuous Throne Room, which was inspired by the uniquely ornate Byzantine churches of Greece. Featuring a gorgeous blue domed ceiling and a mural showing Saint George slaying a dragon, there's one notable piece of furniture missing – the throne itself. It had not been made when King Ludwig died, and so the order was cancelled shortly afterwards.

At the very top of the castle is the Hall of Singers, which was intended to be a concert venue for the king to indulge his passion for music. In fact, the entire castle was an homage to Wagner. Fitted out with wood floors and ceilings, and dripping with golden paint, it is the largest room in the castle and resembles a great hall.

To get to know the king better, look into his bedroom. He only spent 11 nights in the castle during his lifetime, but this room reveals a more intimate side to the king. On its walls, you'll find the tragic tale of Tristan and Isolde – it's said that the king used operatic stories like this as an escape from his lonely reality.

Step out onto the king's balcony at the end of your visit for a breath of fresh mountain air, and plan where to visit next. You can also explore Ludwig's childhood home, Hohenschwangau Castle, cross the Marienbrücke bridge for stunning panoramic views, or alternatively take a hike around the Alpsee Lake to revel in the area's natural wonders.

03

THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY

Steeped in legend, Northern Ireland's top attraction boasts stunning views across to Scotland

As the sun rises over Northern Ireland, the view from one area of the north coast is nothing short of stunning. With the rays bouncing off the Atlantic Ocean, standing on one of the three outcrops of volcanic rock, frozen in perfect hexagonal columns, it seems as though time has stopped. With just the sound of the water lapping at the shore, it's more tranquil than anything you could imagine. It could be the setting of a myth – and in fact it is.

Legend has it that the Causeway was created by giant Finn McCool as he threw rocks into the water to cross to Scotland and teach another giant, Benandonner, a lesson. Things didn't exactly go Finn's way, and as he scarpered back to Ireland, he destroyed some of the rocks so that Benandonner couldn't follow him. However, the truth is far less tense – the rocky crops are 60 million-year-old pieces of lava that cooled into more than 40,000 interlocking basalt columns, creating something that's breathtaking and awesome in equal measure. And you can climb all over them, all the way out so you can almost touch the ocean – although this isn't advisable on the rare occasion of very strong winds, as there is no barrier between you and the water!

It's easy to see why the Giant's Causeway became a UNESCO Heritage Site in 1986. Northern Ireland's only attraction to make the list, it holds a lot of geological value and has been venerated in both science and the arts over the years. There's more to see than just those outcrops, though. Perhaps most famous is the Wishing Chair, a natural throne created by the basalt columns, and there's also Finn McCool's camel. Local folklore claims it was the only steed that could carry the giant; it's also made of lava that is millions of years old.

If walking is more your thing, there are a few paths, like Shepherd's Steps, that take you up the cliff face, past the Organ Pipes and towards an eight-kilometre (five-mile) path that stretches along the picturesque north coast. You can use this route to visit the ruins of Dunseverick Castle to the east, and on a clear day, you can see over the water to Islay, the southernmost island in Scotland's Hebrides chain. The coastline itself is nothing short of stunning – taking a stroll should be high on your list of priorities.

For those who don't want to take lunch with them, there's a pub a short walk away from the visitor centre called The Nook that offers a true taste of Ulster. The visitor centre itself also hosts a cafe, as well as being home to a small exhibition about the Causeway that includes interactive activities for children. There really is something for everyone here, and it's all just waiting to be discovered.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

It's best to pick a dry day to visit, as the stones become very slippery when wet.

Best time to visit:

April to September

Time zone:

UTC

CURRENCY
£
GBP

Useful sites:

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/giants-causeway
www.ireland.com/en-gb/amazing-places/giants-causeway
www.walkni.com/walks/398/giant-s-causeway

The Giant's Causeway stretches out into the Atlantic Ocean

For the best view of the Alhambra, go to Mirador de San Nicolás in Albaicín

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Buy your tickets online – or be prepared to queue for them overnight.

Best time to visit:

Spring and early summer

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY € EURO

Useful sites:

tickets.alhambra-patronato.es/en/
www.alhambra.info/en/alhambra.asp
www.alhambra.org/en/

04 THE ALHAMBRA

Spain's stunning Moorish palace and its eye-catching Islamic art will transport you back in time

Known for its perfectly Instagrammable gardens, intricate geometric archways and bright-blue fountains, the Alhambra in the Andalusian city of Granada is one of Europe's finest examples of Islamic art and architecture. But the Alhambra doesn't just offer one castle – it has three.

What began life as a Roman mountain fortress would be completely transformed by the Moorish Nasrid dynasty, whose roots were in what is now Saudi Arabia. The 12th-century ruler Muhammad I of Granada saw the old Roman fortification's potential, and rebuilt it to overlook the city.

His successors continued his work and added a palace fit for a king – or a sultan. The complex design also included a marketplace, public baths, offices and workshops, essentially making it a city within a city. Decorated floor to ceiling with delicate patterns, Arabic calligraphy and white marble, the Alhambra's Nasrid Palace and its gardens were also kitted out with the latest technology, including an irrigation system for the Generalife Gardens.

But after the re-Christianisation of Spain in 1492, the new Catholic kings and queens built their own palace on the site, to overshadow the one built by the nation's former Muslim rulers. The Palace of Carlos V's classic Renaissance styling contrasts starkly with the Nasrid buildings, but somehow it works.

The old city of Granada and the Alhambra absolutely must be seen by anyone travelling in southern Spain, but to make the most of your trip you'll need to plan carefully. Be sure to buy your tickets in advance, as they only sell a few hundred tickets on the door each day – and people will queue up overnight to grab them. Your ticket specifies an entry time for the Nasrid palaces, but you are free to wander around the rest of the complex at your leisure.

Once you've made your way past the entrance gates, you'll find yourself in the Generalife Gardens, inspired by the paradise gardens of Persia. You'll discover a huge variety of colourful flowers, flowing water features and shady spots under fruit trees, and you could spend hours here – but you'll have to tear yourself away to visit the palaces themselves.

To see how the Christian kings tried to outshine their Arab predecessors, visit the Palace of Carlos V – though it's worth noting you can only explore the inner courtyard. This is a perfect circle, reminiscent of Spain's famous bullrings.

When your time comes, cross over the threshold into the Nasrid palaces, which include the famous Court of the Lions. Look out for gorgeous Arabesque patterns in the doorways all around the palace – the delight is in the detail. Stained glass gives the palace a burst of colour when it catches the light, and if you look out, you'll see yet more colourful gardens below.

For a taste of the Alhambra's original purpose, clamber along the battlements of the Alcazaba, an Arab fort built over Roman ruins. When you reach the top, survey the Sierra Nevada mountains, the Alhambra complex and the city of Granada from your vantage point – you'll soon understand why this place has been prized by generals, kings and sultans for centuries.

05 LAKE BLED

Take in the jaw-dropping scenery of Slovenia's Lake Bled aboard a boat or with a cream cake

With its beautifully blue waters and picturesque surroundings, Lake Bled is a travel photographer's dream – its painterly scenery really has to be seen to be believed, though.

The Alpine lake is situated in the Julian Alps in northwest Slovenia and lies next to the town of Bled. The postcard-perfect spot is surrounded by mountains and forests, and the medieval Bled Castle sits above the lake on the north shore, adding to the stunning scenery.

The focal point of this beautiful location is Bled Island, which is situated in the middle of the water. There are a few buildings on the island, but the main one is the pilgrimage church dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. Built in the 17th century, the church has a 52-metre-high (170-feet-high) tower and 99 baroque steps leading up to it from the water's edge. On the island you can listen to the church bell ring and even ring it yourself, which, if legend is correct, will make all of your wishes come true!

If you only have time for one activity when you get to Bled, we'd recommend that you visit the island on a traditional Pletna boat – these wooden boats have been taking visitors to the petite island for centuries and are operated by standing oarsmen. Even if you don't fancy exploring the island, the journey to and from the island will give you an alternative view of the area. Just getting out on the water – especially on a sunny, calm day – is a wonderful experience.

It might sound odd, but the Bled cream cake (kremšnita) is a culinary must for any visit to the area. Kavarna Belvedere is a café situated in the most stunning location on the edge of the lake. You'll need to hike up quite a few steps to reach it, but once you get there you'll be fruitfully rewarded. Order a generous slice of the cream cake and enjoy it with an utterly breathtaking elevated view of the lake.

If cream cakes and boats aren't really for you, take a relaxing stroll around the tree-lined water's edge or hop in a horse-drawn carriage for a guided tour from one of Bled's coachmen, also known as fijakers!

For an alternative view of the world-renowned lake, take a trip up to Bled Castle, where you can get a stunning look at the lake, its island and the surrounding peaks. The 12th-century castle boasts impressive architecture as well as a museum collection. You can learn about traditional manual printing in the castle printing works; visit the castle's cellar to bottle wine and seal it with wax; and in the summer you can experience an archery tournament and even meet the castle lord.

The stunning lake is surrounded by imposing mountains

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Dress appropriately as the weather can be changeable here.

Best time to visit:

Any time of year

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY € EURO

Useful sites:

www.slovenia.info/en
www.bled.si/en
uk.viator.com

06 GOLDEN CIRCLE

With so much to see and do, don't be tempted to put Iceland's Golden Circle tour on ice

With so much to offer its visitors, Iceland's Golden Circle will introduce you to the wonders of Reykjavík. If you've never heard of it and are wondering what it is, the answer might surprise you. Iceland's Golden Circle is a sightseeing route to three main attractions of natural beauty in southern Iceland: the heritage-rich Thingvellir National Park, Geysir geothermal area, and the nationally protected Gullfoss waterfall. Instead of driving back and forth, the preferred route is to drive a short circle that's just under 230 kilometres (143 miles). Dozens of Icelandic companies offer tours across the route, which are wildly popular with first-time tourists. It is also possible to drive the route yourself and take in the sights at your own leisure; it really is up to you.

The main areas of the Golden Circle can become crowded, but despite this it is still one of the most memorable routes in the world. Although winter days in Iceland mean drastically shorter daytimes and prolonged darkness, the colder seasons appear to be only slightly less popular than the summer months with tourists, when the sun sets late and rises early. With that in mind, the chance to explore the Golden Circle in the midnight sun makes it the best time to visit to ensure you get the most out of your trip.

The first major stop-gap on the Golden Circle tour is usually the Thingvellir National Park, which sits in the rift valley of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, separating the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. With many major events in the history of Iceland having taken place at Thingvellir, the park is Iceland's national treasure. Among the sublime landscapes, the national park plays a vital role in Icelandic history as the location of the first open-air parliament in Althing, the location where Viking settlers first decided upon the laws of the Icelandic nation. At the site of what is considered to be the oldest parliament in the world, its first sessions were held around the year 930, around a rock (appropriately named by the settlers 'Law Rock'), which still stands today. A single Icelandic flag planted in the rock by the park's operators marks the exact location for the sake of visitors keen to trek to where Iceland civilisation began.

Between the winter and summer months, Iceland's rich landscape can change drastically, meaning that be it spring, summer, autumn or winter, the area has something new to show off every season. In summer, charming freshwater streams highlight the park's vibrant khaki-green fields as they wind along the Ridge's rugged terrain. The beautiful Silfra fissure (a crack in the earth that was ripped open by the movement of the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates) borders the Thingvallavatn Lake and offers scuba divers an opportunity to swim between two continents at the same time. When the harsh, cold winter months set in, the park is covered with a blanket of white snow and ice, changing its landscape once again as the tendrils of freshwater freeze and the sub-zero temperatures invade Thingvallavatn Lake, which eventually becomes partially frozen. The park evolves from a thriving spring oasis to a winter wonderland in just a few months.

Thingvellir is one of the most important areas of historical, cultural and geological significance in Iceland

The National Park plays a vital role in Icelandic history

The famous hot springs of Geyser are also a popular stop along the Golden Circle route, attracting thousands of visitors every year. Located in southwest Iceland, the geothermal area of Haukadalur Valley is home to multiple hot springs and geysers. Strip off and jump into the natural springs and experience the relaxing open-air pools. The Great Geysir, once known for propelling water up to 70 metres (230 feet) high, is rarely active these days. Nevertheless, there are plenty of hot springs and geysers for visitors to sink into, including the powerful and infamous Strokkur, which spurts jets of hot water up to 40 metres (131 feet) high every five to ten minutes. Keep your camera close as you will not want to miss the amazing display of nature.

In terms of size and volume, the Ölfusá River is Iceland's largest by volume, carrying more water to the Atlantic than any other river in the country. Don't believe us? Then visit Gullfoss, or Golden Falls, and watch the rapids of Ölfusá thunder 30 metres (98 feet) down to a valley floor and feel

Gullfoss (Golden Falls) is located in the canyon of the Hvítá River in southwest Iceland, and is a popular part of the Golden Circle route

the fresh spray against your skin. In the early 20th century, land owners considered selling the waterfall to foreign investors who intended to harness the energy of the waterfall as a way of generating electricity. Thankfully the plan fell through and the government stepped in, turning it into a protected site to ensure that Iceland's beauty wouldn't be harvested by any eager energy tycoons in the future.

As well as the three main attractions of the Golden Circle, there are also multiple other stop-off points that can be explored along the way, such as soaking in the geo-pool that is Reykjadalur's hot river, or the elusive Secret Lagoon natural pool located in the village of Flúðir. If you're looking for something more educational, then a visit to the fascinating (and frankly quite impressive) hydropower museum known as the Nesjavellir Geothermal Power Plant is definitely worth doing. Located a short drive from the Hengill geothermal area and Thingvellir National Park, the power station, which serves the Greater Reykjavík area, produces around 120 megawatts of electrical power and around 1,110 litres of hot water (80 to 85 degrees Celsius / 176 to 185 degrees Fahrenheit) per second, and gives the opportunity to explore an approximately 3,000-year-old explosion crater lake – Kerið volcanic crater. Thanks to a natural change in Iceland's landscape (created as the land moved over a localised hotspot), the area commonly known as Iceland's Western Volcanic Zone includes several crater lakes such as Reykjanes Peninsula and the Langjökull glacier. However, Kerið is the one that has the most visually recognisable caldera still intact.

Iceland's Golden Circle route takes visitors to stunning scenic lookout points such as national parks, waterfalls and geothermal areas like Haukadalur

The Golden Circle trail could be done in a matter of hours, but with this much natural wonder to see, we recommend you spend a lot longer soaking up the spectacular sights and fascinating history of Iceland.

The Northern Lights

Once you've finished the Golden Circle route, there's every chance you'll be hooked on Iceland's natural beauty and be craving more. If that's the case then a complementary tour to the Golden Circle is to go in search of the world's most stunning natural light displays: the Northern Lights. While the Golden Circle might be more preferable in the summer, this is one advantage to visiting Iceland in the winter, when the dark nights highlight the aurora borealis – a dazzling result of particles in the air, reacting with one another to give off colourful light patterns. Many travellers will tell you that this is a must-see when you visit Iceland, and they're not wrong. Check out a tour and marvel at the fluorescent greens, purples, oranges and reds as they fill the night sky for what could be a few minutes, but if you're lucky, it could be a few hours.

Strokkur, one of Iceland's most famous geysers, beside the Hvítá River, erupts every few minutes in a stunning display of nature

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

If hiring a car, make sure you book one in advance, as there's a limited supply.

Best time to visit:

June to August (for more daylight)

Time zone:

UTC

CURRENCY
kr
ICELANDIC KRONA

Useful sites:

www.thingvellir.is/en/
www.inspiredbyiceland.com
www.extremeiceland.is/en/destinations/the-golden-circle

07 METEORA

Make your own pilgrimage to Greece's spellbinding monasteries of Meteora

If you go to Meteora, you're guaranteed a great view, whichever monastery you're exploring

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Men and women must cover everything, except their heads and forearms.

Best time to visit:

Late spring to early autumn

Time zone:

UTC+2

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites:

www.visitmeteora.travel/
www.meteora-greece.com/
www.discovergreece.com/en/mainland/thessaly-sporades/meteora

Greece is well known for its plethora of monasteries, churches and other religious sites, often built in inaccessible places such as mountaintops and rocky islets out to sea. But none of these test their visitors' devotion more than the monasteries of Meteora, a city in the sky, where six working monasteries cling to the edge of rock pillars for dear life.

Religious folk, including monks, nuns and even hermits have inhabited this remote part of Greece since the days of early Christianity, but the threat of invasion forced them to retreat up the mountain. Eventually, their buildings were constructed on teetering rock pillars, or at the edges of sheer cliffs, in order to ensure maximum inaccessibility.

At its height of popularity, 24 religious sites operated in the Meteora mountains, but today only six remain. All six are open to the public, at the bargain price of just three Euros each. Inside, you can enjoy ancient frescoes that still shimmer in the light, painstakingly painted chapels, well-kept gardens, and even some ingenious technology to help make the monks' lives on the rocks a little easier.

The monasteries are in a beautiful setting, surrounded by dramatic mountains, a vast plateau, and woodlands filled with nature. It's a popular spot for hiking, and many take the tree-lined path from the valley floor up to the monasteries, finding it a rewarding experience.

But, if you don't fancy clambering uphill in the searing Greek sunshine, there is a road that takes you to the entrance of all the open monasteries. Once you get there, be prepared to ascend (and descend) hundreds of steps, cross bridges over steep drops, or go through dark and narrow caves to get into the sanctuary of the complex.

Each monastery has different opening hours, and some are closed on certain days, so before you go it's essential to check this information and plan your route accordingly.

Most visitors start with Great Meteoron, the largest and most famous monastery. As well as the standard chapel, garden, museum and courtyard, you can step inside the monastery kitchen, where monks prepared their food and wine. A little deeper into the complex you'll find something far creepier – an ossuary, filled with skulls and bones of monks who once lived and died in Great Meteoron.

A little way downhill is Varlaam Monastery, with its beautiful architecture and stunning viewpoints, including a shaded pavilion that looks over the edge of the mountain.

Then, if you're a film buff, it's certainly worth the difficult trek to Agia Triada, which was used as the villain's headquarters in the Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*.

Next, you can visit the two convents, Rousanou and Agios Stefanos – the latter of which has been recently restored to its former glory. End your day at the bottom of the valley with Nikolaos Anapafsas, one of the hardest to reach but from its courtyard you can see the eerie remains of abandoned monasteries precariously perched on surrounding rocks.

At the end of your long day, you'll want to sit down, and there's no better way to relax than watching the sun go down over the monasteries. Along the road, there are a number of viewpoints you can catch this spectacular sundown – though be careful not to fall off the edge.

The historic method of travel is still available to tourists

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

The city is always incredibly busy in late spring and early summer, so try to avoid these months.

Best time to visit:

All year round (the city is less busy in winter, but it is cooler)

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites:

www.veneziaunica.it/en
www.venice-museum.com
veneziaautentica.com

08

VENICE

Explore Italy's City of Water and its vibrant history

The city of Venice isn't just steeped in history – its past flows through its famous canals and can be seen in every crevice of the city's magnificent architecture. If you're looking for a cultural trip with a Renaissance vibe, you needn't look any further. But don't be fooled into forcing Venice into this corner because it has so much more to offer you.

In the 18th century, Venice was a party city and in some ways it still is – especially if you visit in the run-up to Lent. At that time of year, Venice really lets its hair down and goes all out in Carnevale. An already-vibrant Venice comes alive as the streets are filled with people in elaborate costumes and masks in an open-air festival that spans the entire city. You'll find live music in the squares, balls and parties to attend, and an endless list of sights to see.

For those looking for something a little quieter, it's important to remember that Venice is an incredibly busy tourist city thanks to its stunning buildings and lively history, but as long as Carnevale isn't on, you should be okay. When the streets aren't full of mask-wearing revellers, you'll find it a lot easier to check out the other attractions Venice offers you.

It's the gondolas that are most associated with the city. You'd regret it if you flew all that way and missed out on the classic experience of riding through Venice's canals via the traditional method. You can book tours of the city from the water or you can simply go for a ride, but it's best to stay away from the Grand Canal as it can get incredibly busy. It is a must-do experience, though, as there is no other way to appreciate how to get around in the Floating City.

For some good Gothic architecture, the Doge's Palace is where you'll want to head next. Built in 1424, it was one of the city's most important buildings, and it reopened as a museum in 1923. During the Venetian Republic, this was where the ruler would live, spending his/her days in opulent apartments and stunning halls. The palace also has chambers from when the city was administrated from there, and a prison, connected by the famous Bridge of Sighs. For more splendour, check out Saint Mark's Basilica near the Doge's Palace. While the outside is simply stunning, inside really is something to behold. Over 8,000 square metres (86,000 square feet) of mosaics cover the walls, vaults and copulas, telling different stories from the *Bible* with glittering gold backgrounds.

But Venice has more than history. A little-known fact is that Venice is the capital of the Veneto region: the home of Prosecco. With tiny wine bars all through the city, it's impossible to go for a drink and not see it on the menu. It's the perfect excuse to try the different flavours as you sit overlooking the gorgeous canals on a warm summer day.

09

SNOWDONIA

Explore breathtaking highs and enchanting lows in the heart of the Welsh countryside

Standing atop of Mount Snowdon in Wales's northwest region of Snowdonia, you will be blown away by the views it has to offer. Snowdonia is a gem of Welsh culture, scenery and heritage to be enjoyed by everyone who visits. Named 'Eryri' by the Welsh, deriving from the Latin meaning of 'highlands', its diverse landscape offers so much more than hills, including beaches, castles, valleys, woodlands and a charming town – all of which stretch from the southernmost areas of Cadair Idris, the Tarren range and the Dyfi hills, to the northernmost areas of Moel Hebog, Mynydd Mawr and the Nantlle Ridge.

Across Snowdonia, multiple castles and historic heritage sites offer a bountiful insight into Wales's fascinating history. King Edward I created Caernarfon Castle in the late 11th century and to date, it is one of the most impressive castles in Wales. The birth of the first English prince of Wales took place inside the castle in 1284. It was also the setting for the 1969 investiture of the current prince of Wales, His Royal Highness Prince Charles – these are just some of the engaging roles the Welsh have played in Great Britain's compelling heritage.

In addition to Caernarfon Castle, Harlech Castle, Conwy Castle and the ruins of Cymer Abbey attract thousands of visitors every year, and are definitely worth a visit for any history buff. Away from architecture, legend has it that the fierce giant Rhita Gawr, vanquished by the gallant King Arthur, is buried among the region's namesake, Mount Snowdon.

Legends aside, Mount Snowdon is the largest mountain in England and Wales. Standing proud at 1,085 metres (3,560 feet) tall, it is a favoured challenge for experienced hikers to sink their teeth into. At the summit of its daring peak, vistas of beautiful scenery roll across the landscape. Thrill seekers will find the fastest zip wire in the world, while wildlife enthusiasts can find the peregrine falcon and ravens nestled along its rugged cliffs in their natural habitat.

Snowdonia's stunning national park was the third conservation of its kind to be established in Britain (1951) after the infamous Lake District and Peak District. It boasts 2,130 square kilometres (822 square miles) of incredible scenery teamed with 60 kilometres (37 miles) of coastline, including the picture-perfect Cardigan Bay. Snowdonia National Park is also home to more than 1,000 mountain goats, although exactly how these animals came to live there nobody really knows for sure. Approximately a quarter of these enchanting animals can be found around the Beddgelert region. The cliffs are decorated with hardy Arctic alpine plants, including the Snowdon lily. Lower down, visitors find themselves surrounded by beautiful woodlands of oak, alder and wych elm.

After the explorations have come to a halt, visitors will be able to indulge in plentiful traditional Welsh food found around the friendly region. As breathtaking as the views are, the area is one of the wettest places in the United Kingdom. Accumulating an average of 4,473 millimetres (176 inches) of rainfall per year for the past three decades, Crib Goch has the dubious honour of having been crowned the wettest spot in the United Kingdom.

If you're lucky to climb Mount Snowdon on a dry, clear day, the views from the peak are spectacularly breathtaking

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

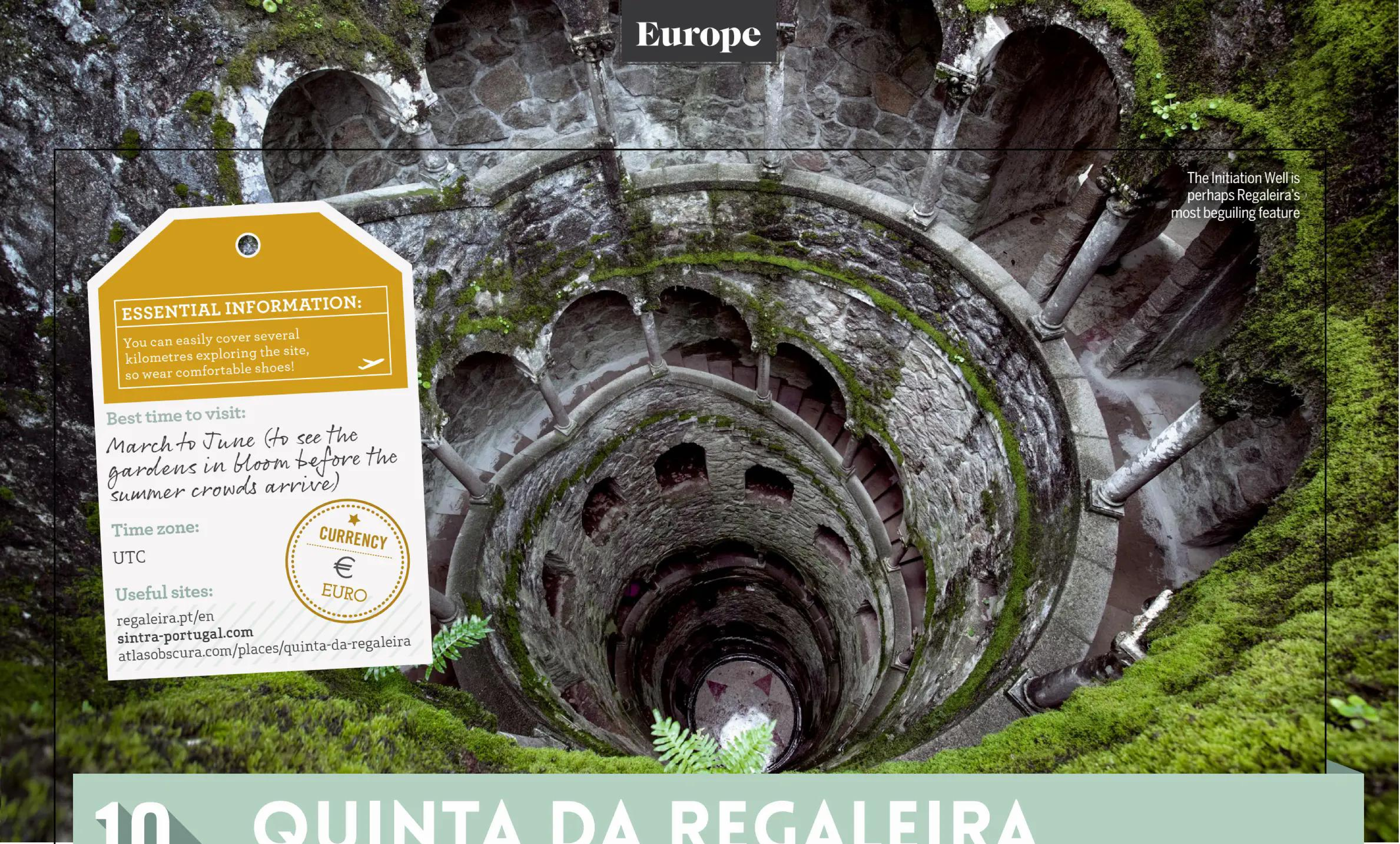
Take your hiking boots and a waterproof coat with you.

Best time to visit:
Summer (to avoid the rain)

Time zone:
UTC

CURRENCY
£
GBP

Useful sites:
www.visitsnowdonia.info
www.snowdonia.gov.wales
www.snowdoniatourism.co.uk



The Initiation Well is perhaps Regaleira's most beguiling feature

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

You can easily cover several kilometres exploring the site, so wear comfortable shoes!

Best time to visit:

March to June (to see the gardens in bloom before the summer crowds arrive)

Time zone:

UTC

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites:

regaleira.pt/en

sintra-portugal.com

atlasobscura.com/places/quinta-da-regaleira

10

QUINTA DA REGALEIRA

Discover the secrets of this enigmatic estate in Portugal, complete with magical gardens

Part of Portugal's Cultural Landscape of Sintra – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – Quinta da Regaleira is a unique palace that has to be seen to be believed.

It was built at the behest of eccentric Brazilian millionaire António Augusto Carvalho Monteiro (known as 'Moneybags Monteiro') in the late 19th century, with the design combining his passions for nature, mythology and philosophy. The result is an estate unlike anything that you'll find anywhere else.

The site has been open to the public since 1998, after it was acquired and restored by the local government. Visitors can explore the bewitching buildings, mysterious monuments and fairy-tale garden surroundings while scouting out examples of hidden symbolism along the way. Carvalho Monteiro's fascination with mysticism is reflected in the motifs and iconography related to alchemy, the Knights Templar, Freemasons and more that can be found throughout the house and grounds.

The Regaleira house itself was a summer retreat for Carvalho Monteiro, and is a fantastical fusion of Manueline, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque design. Its imposing facade features many intricate carvings, inscriptions and sculptures. Close to the main house sits the Roman Catholic chapel, decorated with frescoes, stuccoes and stained glass windows. However, the most intriguing features of the estate lie in – and under – the grounds.

A maze of footpaths wind their way through the beautiful gardens, connecting the site's many monuments. But there are also underground walkways in tunnels that link some areas with caves and grottoes. Quinta da Regaleira's design is intended to provide a connection between the physical and spiritual, and to reflect a journey towards enlightenment. The best place to appreciate this sentiment is by looking up from the bottom of the Initiation Well, a 27-metre-deep (89-feet-deep) underground tower. Travelling through the dark subterranean tunnels to reach the well, and ascending its ten levels via the grand spiral staircase towards the sky above, is an almost otherworldly experience. And that's the idea. The well is intended to portray the link between Earth and the heavens above.

Visitors are welcome to explore on their own, but audio and guided tours will offer much greater insight and reveal some of Regaleira's secrets that otherwise remain hidden in plain sight. Guided tours will teach you a great deal about the estate, its history and construction, and will help put the symbolic design details into context. It's a good idea to book in advance to make sure you secure a spot.

If you prefer to take things at your own pace, audio guides can be rented from the ticket office, and the 30 designated listening points dotted around the house, chapel and gardens provide extra information. All of these are available in multiple languages.

There's also the incongruously modern option of an augmented reality tour. Simply download the Quinta da Regaleira 4.0 app to your device and then you can learn more about the estate through characters from its history as you take any of the five pre-programmed routes around the grounds.

Quinta da Regaleira is an enchanting estate that will not fail to surprise you

11 NORWAY'S FJORDS

Travel in the footsteps of the Vikings across some of the most spectacular landscapes on the planet

Whether scrambling the rocks of Romsdalsfjord or paddling out of Geirangerfjord, few of the world's landscapes are as humbling or visceral as Norway's fjords. Ahead, the water reflects snow-capped peaks; to each side, the earth rises into bold, grey mountains steeped in pine trees. This is the great outdoors at its purest, where only the strongest survive – the land of the Vikings.

These landscapes were forged by the planet's most powerful forces – undersea valleys, 2.5 million years in the making. Carved out of the earth by enormous glaciers over successive ice ages, Norway's 1,000 fjords are long, deep, narrow bodies of water, surrounded by steep land. Though surprisingly diverse, they are unified in their projection of might and majesty.

The country's southernmost fjord, Lysefjord, drives 40 kilometres (25 miles) inland, nestled at parts by mountains 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) high. Though at its mouth, the coast of Stavanger, it is just 13 metres (43 feet) deep, it reaches depths of 400 metres (1,312 feet). Towering above is the 604-metre (1,982-feet) Preikestolen, or Pulpit Rock, boasting one of the world's greatest views. Formerly known as Hyvlatånnå, or 'planed tooth', the plateau makes for a truly remarkable hike. The easiest way up is two hours via the world's longest, albeit squeakiest, staircase – a daunting 4,444 wooden steps. Away from the beaten track, cairns hide within an overgrown forest, guiding truly hardened adventurers on a journey of uphill trekking and scrambling. The reward is well worth the effort, though. Sunrise over the Lysefjord's trees, lit in verdant hues of green, is truly a sight to behold.

Elsewhere, wedged 1,094 metres (3,589 feet) high between the Kjerag mountain crevasse, is a giant boulder, dubbed 'Kjeragbolten'; perhaps the planet's most terrifying selfie spot. Despite the fjord's popularity, it is still possible to carve out some space to be at one with nature, canoeing across the water alone.

Further north, Norway's second-longest fjord, Hardangerfjord, stretches 173 kilometres (107 miles) from the Atlantic Ocean, into the Hardangervidda mountain plateau in the heart of the country. At points 900 metres (2,953 feet) deep, the 'Queen of the Fjords' is a fascinating region. Famous for its apple trees, introduced by 13th-century English monks, it is a landscape of striking contrasts. The village of Ulvik typifies the Norwegian ideal, with quaint fruit farms littered up the slopes. Further afield is Vøringsfossen, Norway's largest waterfall, chugging gargantuan volumes of water 182 metres (597 feet) down, into the Måbødalen valley.

True adventure awaits at the village of Skjeggedal, the starting point of the epic hike to Trolltunga, or Troll's Tongue – jutting over a sheer drop. Ascending 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) over 27 kilometres (17 miles), the 12-hour trek is not for the casual stroller. The result is another of Norway's spectacular viewing points over the breathtaking lake Ringedalsvatnet, ringed by awe-inspiring snow-capped behemoths.

While the fjord is rife with charming cabins and hotels, just a two-hour bus trip away is Bergen – the country's second-largest city and bona fide UNESCO centre of gastronomy. Once a crucial part of the Hanseatic League's trading empire, it is today the source of some of the world's most sought-after meat, that has been reared in clean air, on clean land and water. The city's pride is out in full force at the traditional outdoor Fisketorget fish market. In fact, the food is so fresh that at Cornelius Sjømatrestaurant, just a glass-bottomed boat ride away, diners actually see their dinner being caught.

Preikestolen, or Pulpit Rock, towers 604 metres (1,312 feet) over the southern Lysefjord, which is nestled between mountains up to 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) high

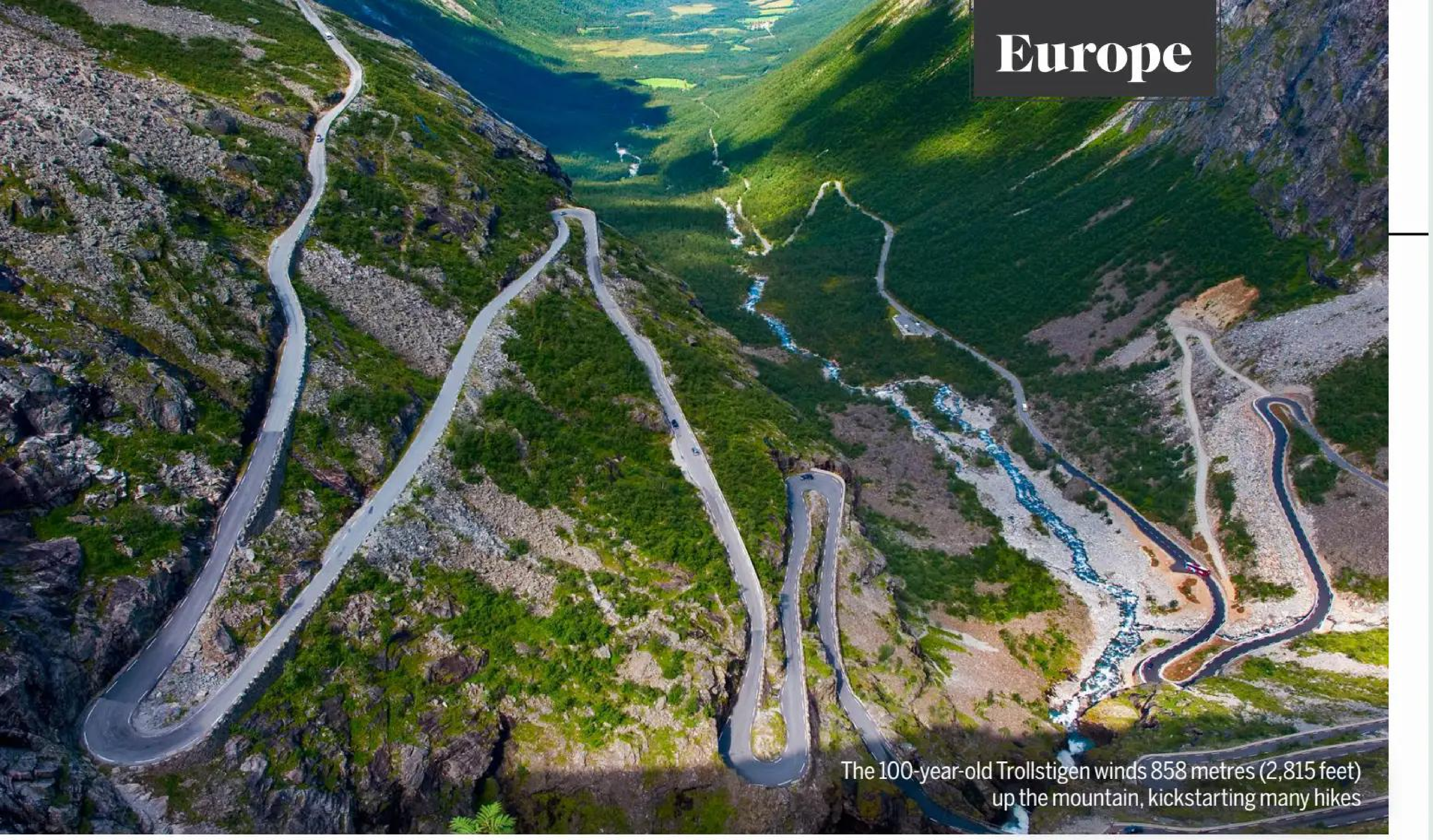
ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
When it comes to payment, card is king. Not everywhere accepts cash, so come prepared.

Best time to visit:
Late May to July, to enjoy the best weather and the midnight sun

Time zone:
UTC+1

CURRENCY
kr
NORWEGIAN KRONE

Useful sites:
www.fjordnorway.com
www.visitnorway.com
www.fjordtours.com



The 100-year-old Trollstigen winds 858 metres (2,815 feet) up the mountain, kickstarting many hikes

Sailing into the fjord is akin to entering paradise

Continuing north, the village of Flåm rests along the 28-kilometre-long (17-mile-long) Aurlandsfjord, a branch of the 'king' of Norway's fjords, the 205,000-metre (673,000-foot) Sognefjord. Proof that size doesn't matter, this is the starting point of one of the world's most remarkable train journeys, the 19-kilometre (12-mile) trip from Flåm to the 866-metre-high (2,841-foot-high) Myrdal. One of the steepest lines on the planet, the stretch travels along the mountains and waterfalls of the Flåm valley, past the 17th-century wooden Flåm Stave Church.

Though just 250 metres (820 feet) wide at its narrowest and 12 metres (39 feet) at its shallowest, the 19-kilometre (12-mile) Nærøyfjord, another sidearm of the Sognefjord, has earned itself UNESCO World Heritage status. Overshadowed on either side by mountains, reaching 1,660 metres (5,446 feet), is a showpiece of all the beauty fjords have to offer – making for a particularly dramatic entrance by ship. Fellow UNESCO alumni, the 14 kilometre-long (nine-mile-long) Geirangerfjord is perhaps even more renowned. A natural harbour, sailing into the fjord is akin to entering paradise; lush, green forests climbing up sheer mountainsides, broken by thunderous waterfalls that eventually trickle down into the crystal-clear water.

The Flåm-Myrdal railway is considered one of the most spectacular train journeys in the world

With an abundance of natural panoramic viewpoints, the area is a popular hiking and biking destination. These range from short strolls to an uphill battle against Eagle Road – named after its historic eagle population – with 11 hairpin bends, leading to a tremendous view of the Seven Sisters waterfall. The truly adventurous can even try their hand at canyoning; rappelling over unforgiving terrain, leaping across canyons, ziplining and even taking a leap of faith from cliff to river. In winter, skiers hurtle themselves down the slopes of Kirketaket instead, beneath the glow of the northern lights.

The 88-kilometre (55-mile) Romsdalsfjord is perhaps most famous for the Trollstigen, or Troll's Road, which winds up the 858-metre (2,815-foot) Stigrøra mountain. Almost 100 years old, from here hikers scramble up the rocky plateau, over boulders and rocks, gripped in the mountainous surroundings looking over the Bispevatnet, a small glacial lake, or staring down the 1,000-metre (3,280-foot) Trollveggen, or Troll's Wall, the tallest vertical rock face in Europe. Elsewhere, a via ferrata system of cables, ladders and other aids give the faint of heart the support they need to take in otherwise inaccessible views. The Intro Wall is perfect for climbing novices, who want to experience mountaineering without the danger. On the opposite end of the spectrum, base jumpers hurtle their bodies from Bispen mountain, soaring across the valley at 241 kilometres (150 miles) per hour.

As the midnight sun melts the sky into a medley of colours, there is nothing under the heavens like Norway's fjords. The word 'fjord' translates to 'where one crosses'. One thing is for sure – once crossed, they cannot be forgotten.

Getting around

For those who like to build flexibility into their itineraries and find their own way around, it is possible to travel along much of the west coast by train. This enables travellers to spend more time exploring Norway's cities, villages and wildlife; whales, puffins and all. The country's network of tunnels, bridges and ferries also makes for stunning road trips.

However, many prefer to enjoy the fjords the Viking way: by sea. While there are many cruise operators around, there's none quite like the Hurtigruten, which has sailed the 34 ports between Bergen and Kirkenes, come rain or snow, since 1893. Hurtigruten offers a variety of trips, from an odyssey across Norway's most beautiful landscapes to a tour of the northern lights, with an on-board physicist and a free trip if they don't show.

Sognefjord is 205,000 metres (673,000 feet) long and 1,308 metres (4,291 feet) deep

Vesuvius still looms over the ruins, and you can climb it if you want to

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

There's little information when you visit, so a guide book or audio guide is a good idea.

Best time to visit:

April to October

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites:

www.pompeiisites.org
www.visitpompeiivesuvius.com/en/pompeii
www.walksofitaly.com/blog/pompeii/guide-visiting-pompeii

12

POMPEII

Step back in time in Italy to the height of the Roman Empire

If you've ever wanted to walk where the Romans have walked before you, Pompeii is the perfect place. Steeped in history with a dramatic past and a stunning up-close view of an active volcano, there's nothing you won't enjoy.

As ruins go, the Bay of Naples is sublime. When Mount Vesuvius, the volcano that looms ominously over the area, erupted in 79 CE, the pyroclastic surge left behind perfectly preserved buildings, streets and even loaves of bread. Thanks to that, we know the layout of almost the entire city, and today we can walk around it. Visit the baths where the citizens would have washed themselves, take a trip to a bakery, and read the graffiti painted on the walls that has remained there for almost 2,000 years. You can even explore a typical Roman house, with what remains of beds, tables and dining couches. And, of course, no trip is complete without a visit to the Villa of the Mysteries where you can view an original Roman fresco in all its splendid glory.

Even with a map, it can be easy to get lost in the streets and transport yourself back to the days of the early Roman Empire. It's the perfect day out for anyone interested in ancient history, and the site is close to local transport links. Perhaps the one drawback of Pompeii is that while it gives you the layout of a Roman town, it does lack two-storey buildings. However, this is where a neighbouring city comes in.

Just a short journey away, Herculaneum, another town wiped out by the volcanic blast, sits, waiting to be explored. Although what's been excavated isn't as vast as the city of Pompeii, you can get a real sense of walking down a Roman street with homes where people lived and the reconstructed wooden balconies where neighbours would have conversed.

If after wandering the streets you want to see some artefacts, head on over to Naples, the sprawling modern city that lies at the foot of Mount Vesuvius. There you'll find the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, which houses objects and mosaics found at Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as other Roman finds from the region. And there's no need to worry about the language barrier – the descriptions are all in English as well as Italian.

The real pièce de résistance, however, is the volcano itself. If you're up for a challenge, you can climb it. Vehicles can take you as far as 1,000 metres (3,280 feet) above sea level, but then you need to walk the last 200 metres (656 feet). However, it's not a race to the top – take your time and enjoy the view. On a clear day, the panoramic view takes you from the city of Naples, across the blue water of the Bay of Naples to the gorgeous city of Sorrento and beyond it the island of Capri – both worth visiting. At the summit, you can peer into an active volcano – but don't worry, there are no hazardous fumes. It is worth noting, though, that Vesuvius will be dangerous when it erupts again. Its cycle is usually every 20 years, but it hasn't erupted since 1944. However, seismologists are closely monitoring it so it won't surprise anyone.

For Roman marvels, the Bay of Naples should be high on your list. With so much to do and see, you'll wonder why it took you so long.

13 LOCH NESS

The home of a legend, there's more to this Scottish loch than meets (or doesn't meet) the eye

Out of over 31,000 Scottish lochs, there's one that has achieved international notoriety. Why? Because it's apparently home to a monster, affectionately called 'Nessie' by the locals after its home. However, Loch Ness deserves attention for more than what might be beneath its surface.

Nestled in the Scottish Highlands on the 100-kilometre (62-mile) Great Glen that sits just under Inverness, Loch Ness has a lot to offer. If it's the water you're going for, you can take a cruise around the loch, and while you're searching for what may be lurking underneath, it's the perfect opportunity to take a look at the stunning scenery. The Highlands are a beautiful part of the world, but the hills around Loch Ness are something else. In the summer months, they are covered in a carpet of purple heather. Autumn brings the deep bronzes and umbers as the leaves turn. Winter shows off its snow-capped hills, turning the landscape into a wonderland. Spring displays vibrant greens as the life is breathed into the area once more.

If getting out on the water isn't quite what you're looking for, there's plenty more to do. A walk along the shore could bring you deer and otters, pottering out and minding their own business. If you venture further, you'll find some small towns waiting to be explored. One of these is Fort Augustus, which sits at the southernmost tip of the loch. There are many stunning walks around the area, and they're accompanied by breathtaking views up the loch.

For fans of history, visit the ruins of Urquhart Castle, which turn Loch Ness into a dramatic backdrop for any photograph. Supposedly the greatest castle in the Highlands, it witnessed Saint Columba's miracle-working in the 6th century, and also served as a prison for legendary Gaelic bard Domhnall Donn.

Inverness is a great base point while you visit Loch Ness, and there's plenty to do in the town, too. Considered the capital of the Highlands, it's home to some wonderful buildings like the famous Brodie Castle, Fortrose Cathedral and the ruins of Beauly Priory. Just outside of town, you can also walk the battlefield of the famous Battle of Culloden where the Jacobites were defeated by English forces. If you like your history a bit older, there are also the Clava Cairns, built in the Bronze Age.

So whether you're looking for an action-packed walking holiday, a hunt for a legendary creature, or something a little tamer, Loch Ness will have something to offer you. And with some of the most beautiful views in all of the British Isles, there's really no reason not to be on your way there.

Fort Augustus is a settlement in the parish of Boleskine and Abertarff, at the south west end of Loch Ness

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Be prepared for any weather, as it can suddenly change!

Best time to visit:

April to September are the warmest months

Time zone:

UTC

CURRENCY

£

GBP

Useful sites:

www.lochness.com

www.visitinvernesslochness.com

scotland.forestry.gov.uk/visit/the-great-glen

14

STONEHENGE

Explore one of Britain's oldest mysteries nestled in the heart of Wiltshire

It's one of the most recognisable landmarks in Britain, but no one really knows how it came to be. If you're driving down the A303 just north of Salisbury, the circle of stones in a field by a busy main road may not look like much. But that's where you'd be mistaken.

Those stones have been there for at least 3,500 years, their age just part of their appeal to tourists. The mystery is probably the reason why it's visited by thousands each year. As the years have gone by, stones have disappeared and the landscape itself has changed, so we've had to make some guesses as to what the henge was used for. Two stones are named for their purpose – altar and, somewhat sinisterly, sacrifice – but the significance of the others is not so clear. Some even have little swords and axes carved on them but again, we don't really know why.

You can walk the whole way round the stones, and audio guides are available for those who are interested in a more in-depth history of the henge, but there's more to do at the site. Take the chance to visit the 360-degree view from Standing in the Stones in the visitor centre to see what Stonehenge is like through the seasons. It's also a chance to see the winter and summer solstices, although you can experience those for real every year.

The solstice celebrations are one of the only times that you can get up close and personal with the stones instead of simply walking around them, and thousands of people are usually in attendance to see the Sun rise on the longest day of the year in the summer and the shortest day in the winter. Naturally, it's the summer solstice that attracts the most people, who watch the Sun rise behind the Heel Stone, the ancient entrance to the stone circle. You'll also see modern pagans and druids performing rituals and celebrations when the first rays of light hit the centre of Stonehenge, and the sunrise itself is beautiful to watch.

There's also a Stonehenge exhibition that's home to more than 250 archaeological artefacts, as well as the chance to step inside replica Neolithic houses, which will give you an insight into how people lived 4,000 years ago when Stonehenge was being constructed. It's an opportunity to see crafts of the time taking place, like flint knapping, making rope out of rushes, and grinding grain with a quern and a rider.

If you want to explore the ancient landscape further, you're more than welcome to do so. The Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site is home to another set of stones – the Avebury henge – and you can explore the area by foot or get the shuttle bus direct.

So if you're able to visit one of Britain's oldest archaeological sites, see if you can piece together some of the mysteries.

They may not look like much, but the history of the stones is fascinating

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

It's best to wear suitable footwear, especially if it's been raining.

Best time to visit:

March to October

Time zone:

UTC

CURRENCY
£
GBP

Useful sites:

www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge
www.stonehenge.co.uk
www.visitwiltshire.co.uk/things-to-do/stonehenge-p133703

There's no shortage of villages, forests or mountains to explore in the Dolomites

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Camping is forbidden outside designated zones.

Best time to visit:

May to September for hiking, and November to April for winter sports

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites:

www.dolomitisuperski.com
www.dolomitemountains.com
www.dolomiti.org

15

THE DOLOMITES

Come snow or sun, Italy's Dolomites are a haven of fair weather and winter adventure

The Dolomites, Italy's northern Alps, project a beauty that can only be found in nature at its wildest; dramatic, romantic and rugged. Sheer rock walls, cragged spires and steeples rise over valleys, wide and narrow – contrasted by soft snow in winter and rolling fields, forests and flowers come spring.

Having hosted the 1956 Winter Olympics, the range is perhaps best known for its winter landscape; with the Dolomiti Superski pass giving access to more than 1,200 kilometres (746 miles) of slopes. The 2,275-metre-high (7,464-feet-high) Kronplatz ski resort hosts some 116 kilometres (72 miles) of pearlescent pistes of varying difficulties, complete with picturesque forests and panoramic views of the UNESCO World Heritage mountains.

It is also home to the Messner Mountain Museum, a testament to the history of mountaineering, from the mind of legendary climber Reinhold Messner. Designed by famous architect Zaha Hadid, it rests along the most spectacular viewing platform in the region; in warmer months, paragliders and tandem riders float down into the valley from here.

However, no winter adventure is complete without a trip down the notorious Sellaronda circuit. The gruelling 26-kilometre (16-mile) run can take six hours to complete, which is made a little more palatable thanks to the abundance of restaurants nearby, dishing up delicious dumplings and bombardinos – an egg nog or advocaat-based winter toddy. Overnight refuge can be found at the Dolomites' various 'rifugios' – high-altitude mountain huts.

When the snow melts, the Dolomites are transformed from a winter wonderland to a hiker's paradise. Edelweiss, silvery cranesbill and mezereon lend the valleys a hearty dose of colour and fragrance; celebrated at the Antonio Segni Alpine Botanical Garden.

One of the quintessential Dolomite trails is the forested stroll to the bright, baby-blue Lake Sorapis. Along the way, adventurers have the opportunity to explore tunnels dug by soldiers during World War I, when Italy fought the Austro-Hungarian Empire for control of the area. However, for the truly daring, the Brigata Tridentina route requires hikers to climb near-sheer cliff faces, while navigating the 'via ferrata' mountaineering system invented during World War I; using metal rungs, safety cables, bridge ladders, chains and suspension bridges.

Amid the various trails of Val Gardena, the Gardena Museum offers insight into the local tradition of woodcarving, with some prolific pieces on display at the Monte Pana Chapel and San Giacomo Church. There are also ruins to explore, such as a 13th-century castle owned by renowned composer and poet Count Wolkenstein. The area is also a cyclist's dream, with numerous biking trails. Many riders enjoy the 52-kilometre (32-mile) route around the Sellaronda, once the snow has melted.

There is no finer way to round off a tiring day than an immersion in the region's unique combination of local, Italian and German cuisine. The Dolomites boast the highest density of Michelin-starred chefs in Italy, with the small Alta Badia home to six alone. St Hubertus, in the village of San Cassiano, prides itself on celebrating local mountain ingredients and degustation under the guidance of three Michelin star chef Norbert Niederkofler.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
The airport is quite far from the city centre, so make sure you know how you're going to get to your hotel.

Best time to visit:
All year round

Time zone:
UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites:
www.turismoroma.it
www.rome.net
www.colosseum-rome-tickets.com

ROME

If you want both ancient and modern, the Eternal City is everything you need

It doesn't matter what you're after – Rome will probably have it. From ancient Roman ruins to incredible Italian pizza, it's a city that's got everything covered. It's impossible to be short of things to do and sights to see – your main problem will be trying to fit everything in!

The best place to start is probably at the beginning and what Rome is most famous for: the Roman Empire. Everywhere you go, there are reminders of what has come before you and the civilisation that once ruled the Mediterranean. First and foremost there's the Colosseum, the structure that witnessed gladiators fight each other to death, but that's not all. Nearby, you can see what remains of the Circus Maximus, the stadium used for ancient chariot races, as well as the Forum, where Romans shopped and conducted business. You can even take a walk up the Palatine Hill, one of the Seven Hills of Rome. It's here that you can see the famed Arches of Titus and Constantine. Just a few hundred metres away you'll also be able to explore the ruins of the Domus Aurea, or Gold House, a building that was started by nefarious emperor Nero in a bid to display his grand power and vast wealth.

If you want to see a feat of Roman engineering, take a visit to the Pantheon, which dates back to around 113 CE. Although no one knows what the Romans used it for, it has now found purpose as a church. When you visit it, make sure you look up at the magnificent domed ceiling made of thousands of tons of concrete that have been held up for almost 2,000 years.

Take a ten-minute walk from the Pantheon through Rome's bustling streets filled with traditional Italian buildings, and you will find yourself in front of one of the most famous attractions the city has to offer: the Trevi Fountain. At 26.3 metres (86.2 feet) high and 49.15 metres (161.25 feet) wide, the Baroque fountain is a sight to behold. Having featured in celebrated films such as *Roman Holiday* and *La Dolce Vita*, today

There's so much to do in Rome that you'll struggle to fit everything in

it's also associated with making wishes. Tradition dictates that if you throw a coin over your left shoulder with your right hand, your wish will come true, and people believe it – it's estimated that 3,000 euros are thrown into the fountain each day. Of course, the money has to go somewhere – in this case, it's used to subsidise a supermarket for Rome's homeless population.

The Piazza di Trevi isn't Rome's only famous square – the city is littered with them. One you may have heard of is the Piazza di Spagna, or Spain Square, home to the Spanish Steps that were first opened in 1725. Made famous by featuring in films like *Roman Holiday* and F Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender Is the Night*, the steps are also decorated at certain times of the year. At Christmas, a crib scene is placed at the first landing; and in early spring, parts of the steps are covered in potted azaleas.

Right at the top of the Spanish Steps, you can find another of Rome's highlights. The Villa Medici is currently home to the Academy of France in Rome, but tours are available from Tuesday to Sunday in English, Italian, French, Spanish and Russian. You can see magnificent sculptures, and uncover the villa's history before ending your visit at the belvedere, which boasts a stunning panoramic view of the Eternal City.

Behind the Villa Medici are the expansive gardens of the Villa Borghese, and if you're looking to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city for a while, this is the place you need to

16

The Colosseum

It's an enduring symbol of Rome, and there's a reason for that – it's been standing since 80 CE. The largest amphitheatre ever built, it's Italy's most-visited attraction every year, and it's easy to see why. When you enter the ancient structure, you really get a sense of its vast size, even though not all of it remains thanks to the weather and the people who have been traipsing through it for almost 2,000 years.

With 80 entrances, and room for more than 50,000 spectators, it's impossible not to feel small in this Roman marvel. The sheer scale of the building itself as you stand next to it helps you to understand how it would have dominated the ancient skyline, and you can look directly into the area underneath the Colosseum's floor where the wild animals were kept before they were lifted to ground level through a complex system of pulleys.

A trip to the Colosseum really is a must for all visitors to Rome, and its close proximity to other Roman ruins means that you can have quite a historical day or two, especially if you buy a ticket that also gives you entry to the Roman Forum and the Palatine for a reduced fee.

17

Vatican City

The heart of the Catholic world, Vatican City is not to be missed. A tiny city-state within the heart of Rome, it's the only place in the world where you'll find ATMs that you can read in Latin – but it's also home to so much more.

Covering less than half of a square kilometre (less than a quarter of a square mile), it's the epicentre of Roman Catholicism and the site of the infamous Saint Peter's Basilica. A stunning piece of Italian Renaissance architecture, check it out before heading to the Vatican Museums, which contain paintings, sculptures and other works of art that have been collected by popes through the centuries.

While you wait in ticket queues in Saint Peter's Square, be sure to take in the beauty of your surroundings. The piazza is unabashedly opulent with a 25.5-metre-tall (84-feet-tall) red granite obelisk in the centre, which had originally been erected in Egypt by an ancient pharaoh. Even if you don't go into any of the museums, it's definitely worth a trip just to see this grand sight.

No trip to Rome is complete without some time gaping at the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel

go. You can sit by the lake or take in the 18th-century 'temples' around the park, like that of Asclepius and Diana. If you delve deeper, you'll also find a replica of Shakespeare's Globe and the Borghese Gallery and Museum, in which you can see original artworks by Bernini and Caravaggio. In the northwest corner of the park you'll also come across Rome's zoo.

To the south of the park is the Piazza del Popolo, where you'll find an obelisk dedicated to Ramesses II. Here you'll also find Santa Maria del Popolo, a basilica that has two stunning canvases by Caravaggio and magnificent Renaissance decorations inside. If you head along the Tiber just a little further south, you'll find yourself at the ruins of the Mausoleum of Augustus, the resting place of the first Roman emperor. While it's currently not much to look at, it is an incredibly important part of Rome's history and in the process of being renovated.

A quick walk across the river will find you at the Mausoleum of Hadrian, more commonly known today as Castel Sant'Angelo, which is home to the remains of another great Roman emperor. However, that's not all the history this building has seen. At the beginning of the 14th century, the Catholic Church began to use it as a castle, connecting it to the nearby Saint Peter's Basilica in what is now Vatican City, and it was a major stronghold in the Sack of Rome of 1527. It has also been used as a prison, before finally becoming a museum, which is its role today.

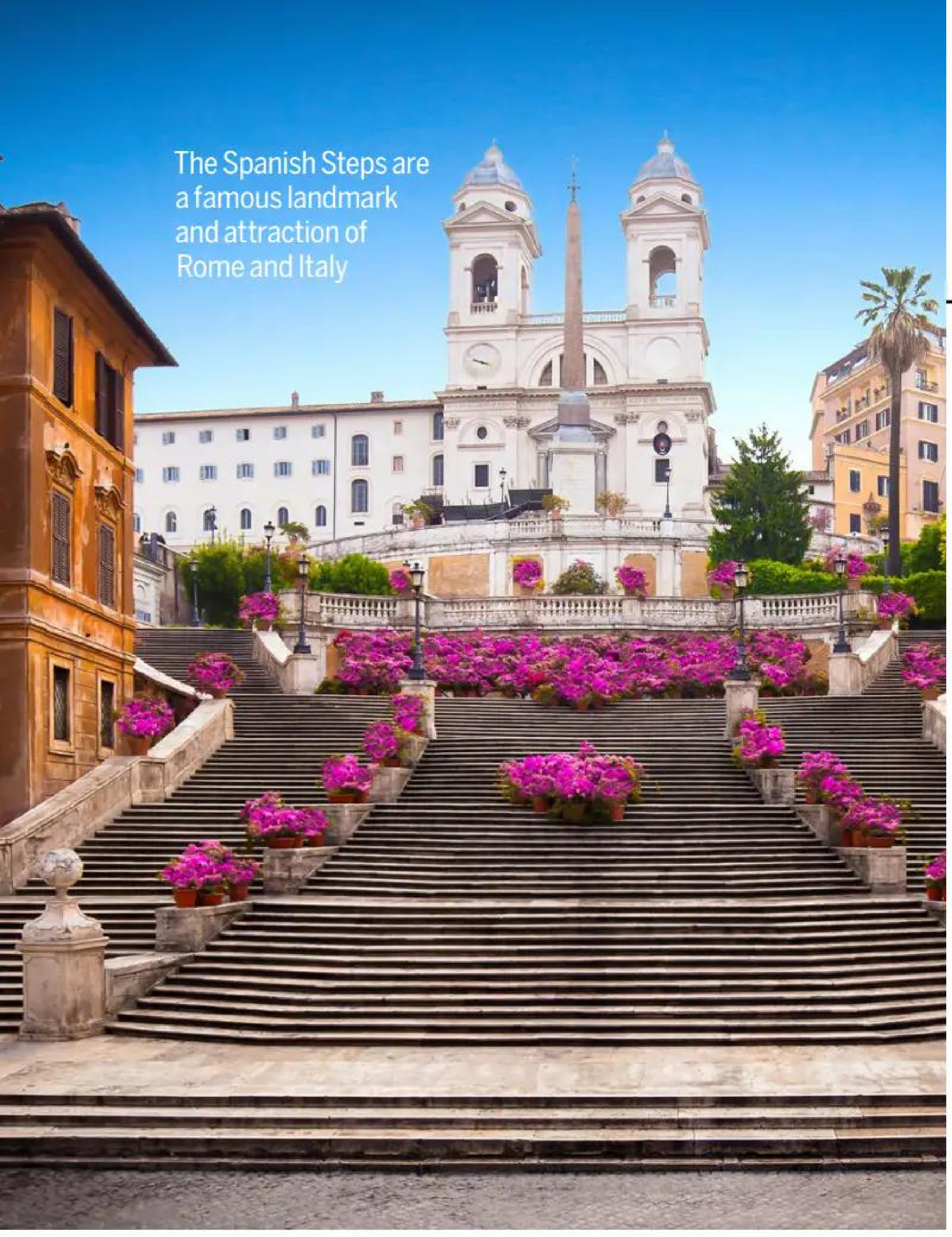
Head west along Via dei Corridori or Via della Conciliazione and you'll find something incredibly unique to the city of Rome – a microstate. The powerhouse of Roman Catholicism, Vatican City was made its own country in 1929, and is home to Saint Peter's Basilica, the residence of the Pope and the infamous Sistine Chapel. The pictures that you often see really don't do the frescoes justice – you have to see them to truly understand the size of them and get a feel for their vibrant colours, as they tell the stories of the *Bible* larger than life on the walls. And while you are there, make sure you look up at the ceiling to see Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* in all of its splendour and glory.

Just in case you're looking for something a little darker on your holiday, Rome's got you covered. If you head northeast out of the city centre on Via Salaria, you'll find yourself at the Catacombs of Priscilla, a series of underground tombs that you can explore with a guide to understand the early days of Christianity in what is now considered one of the most Catholic cities in the world. There's no need to worry about seeing any bodies, though, as any that were there have been moved out by archaeologists; the tour focuses more on ancient religion and burial. You'll also have a chance to see what is the oldest known image in existence of the Virgin Mary. Not bad for an afternoon trip.

Sports fans need not be left out of what Rome has to offer – the city has two national stadiums

> The pictures that you often see really don't do the frescoes justice

Castel Sant'Angelo's entrance makes a dramatic and intimidating sight



The Spanish Steps are a famous landmark and attraction of Rome and Italy

Remember to make a wish at the Trevi Fountain

relatively close to each other in Quartiere I Flaminio and across the river in Quartiere XV Della Vittoria. In the former, you'll find the Stadio Flaminio, the current home of Italy's rugby team. The latter is home to the Stadio Olimpico, the largest sports stadium in all of Italy, which is used primarily for football.

Those wanting to see all that Rome has to offer in a short, accessible trip can check out one of the many tours available. Some show you the main attractions in a day, while others give commentary as you walk around specific areas. As with most European cities, there's also a hop-on, hop-off bus that can give you the lie of the land before you embark on your own adventures, and you can use your bus pass to get you from place to place for as long as your ticket lasts. For a different view of the city, you can even go on a boat tour that will take you up and down the Tiber, pointing out the interesting places to visit on each side of Rome's historic river.

If you want something a little more special, many companies also offer night tours on foot or coach so that you have the chance to see the city illuminated with dramatic lighting against the night sky. You can even explore the Colosseum by night on a 2.5-hour tour that takes you all around the site – even to the underground chambers and arena floor, which are off-limits to standard ticket holders.

You'll find many deals around the city offering cheaper ticket prices in separate passes, and it is definitely worth looking into these. The Roma Pass, for example, gives you free entrance to one or two archaeological sites, depending on which ticket you go for, as well as unlimited travel on the city's public transport (that's the Metro and buses) for the duration of your ticket. There's also the OMNIA card for Rome and the Vatican, which gives you fast-track entry to some attractions, free entry to some others, a free hop-on, hop-off bus tour for three days, discounted entry to even more sites, and free travel cards and guide books. Whichever option you go for, you'll be sure to find some great deals.

Of course, no holiday to Italy would be worth it without trying some of the local cuisine, and Rome is littered with restaurants and cafés offering pizza, pasta and deliciously creamy tiramisù. It is worth noting that tipping isn't necessarily a custom that's practised in Italy; you'll often find a service charge applied to your bill instead. But if you're looking for a quick bite and you don't have time to stop, what do you do? The answer is quite simple: find a street cart. Rome's street carts sell some of the most delicious pizza around, for just a couple of euros, and you can eat it while hurrying off to your next attraction or while sitting in a peaceful park or bustling square.

If, somehow, you run out of things to do in Rome – which, let's face it, is highly unlikely – there are plenty of companies offering day trips to other famous places, such as the ancient ruins of Pompeii to the southeast and Florence to the northwest. But it's unlikely you'll want to leave the city centre – there's far too much to do.

18

St Peter's Basilica

Don't be deterred by the long queues – Saint Peter's Basilica is well worth the wait. Once inside (entry into the main church is free), you'll be greeted with a decadent Catholic basilica that is considered one of holiest Christian sites in the world.

After you've taken in the wonders, your visit will be far from over. For a small extra charge, you can climb the 551 steps to the top of the basilica's famous cupola, or dome. You can also descend underneath the basilica to the Vatican Grottos, where you can see the tombs of several popes and kings and queens from the 10th century.

Getting to the basilica couldn't be easier. There are four or five bus routes that go right through the city-state, and it's just a ten-minute walk from the nearest Metro stop. However, it is worth noting that the basilica has a strict dress code – men must wear long trousers and have their shoulders covered, while women should not have bare shoulders or skirts above the knee.

The best views of the Acropolis can be found in rooftop bars and restaurants in the Thissio, Monastiraki or Plaka neighbourhoods

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Buy the combination ticket so you can see other ancient sites, too.

Best time to visit:

Spring and summer (to avoid potential rain)

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites:

www.athenswalkingtours.gr
www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en
www.athensguide.com/acropolis.html

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ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS

Greece's modern city of Athens still beats around its ancient heart, as all roads lead to the Acropolis

It was the place where Athenians came to worship their city's goddess, Athena. It was also a thriving hub for trade, the military and even democracy. The Acropolis of Athens is so much more than the breathtaking Parthenon, but it's a good place to start. Built in the 5th century BCE, the Parthenon temple once contained a gigantic statue of Athena herself, where worshippers would come to lay gifts and sacrifices at her feet. The temple has decayed significantly since then, and it has been hit by a few Ottoman and Venetian cannonballs, but what remains is as stunning now as it was back then.

To get to this world-famous landmark, take the metro to Akropoli station. Inside the station, there are replicas of the Parthenon Marbles, and even some archaeological finds to admire. Get out and walk towards the southern entrance to the Acropolis, as opposed to the main entrance, as the queues are considerably shorter there. It's also the best place to start – on your way up to the top of the hill, you'll pass by extensive remains of ancient Athens, where people really lived. On the way, there's the Theatre of Dionysus, a stoa, and the awesome Odeon of Herodes Atticus, which is still in use as an arts venue.

When you have ascended the steps and passed under the imposing propylaea, you'll be greeted with a view of the iconic Parthenon – the moment you've been waiting for. But before you head straight over there, it's worth having a peek at the Athena Nike temple, which is remarkably well preserved for its age. Explore the edges of the great Parthenon and marvel at the ancient genius who built it, and listen to the wind rushing through the pillars.

Take a moment to turn away from the ancient stuff, and look into the modern-day city. The Acropolis is one of the highest points for miles around, so you should be able to see as far as the port of Piraeus, nearly ten kilometres (six miles) away. You can also spot the Greek Parliament, the Temple of Olympian Zeus and more ancient monuments close by. Notice how all the city's main streets lead towards you – despite being 2,500 years old, this monument is still at the centre of Athenian life.

Before you descend the hill to return to the modern, be sure to admire the Erechtheion, which features intricate and impressive pillars of Greek women. One of these was taken by Lord Elgin to decorate his home in Scotland, and it can now be seen in the British Museum.

To make the most of your Acropolis experience, the new Acropolis Museum, which was opened in 2009, is a must. Built to house every single artefact found on the hill and surrounding area, you'll find many archaeological wonders, such as colourful statues and pottery. Modern technology helps you to imagine what the Acropolis was once like in its heyday. However, the museum remains at the centre of a controversy concerning the return of the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles from Britain to Greece, with the Greek government hoping this modern venue will be a suitable home for their lost treasures.

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PLITVIČE LAKES

Explore the ever-changing waterfall paradise of Croatia

Why visit just one lake when you can see 16, all interconnected by spectacular waterfalls? As you wander across the wooden walkways that stretch across Croatia's Plitvice Lakes, you'll be surrounded by brilliant blue-green water that has been shaping the landscape for millennia. The lakes are actually part of one long river flowing between the Mala Kapela and Plješivica mountains, but over time it has been divided up thanks to a natural phenomenon known as a karst landscape.

The minerals in the river basin that give the lakes their distinctive colour also react with organisms in the water to slowly wash up new layers of rock that act as natural dams. Some of these began forming over 200 million years ago, but thanks to the cascading water have been constantly eroded and reformed to create an ever-changing system of waterfalls and lakes.

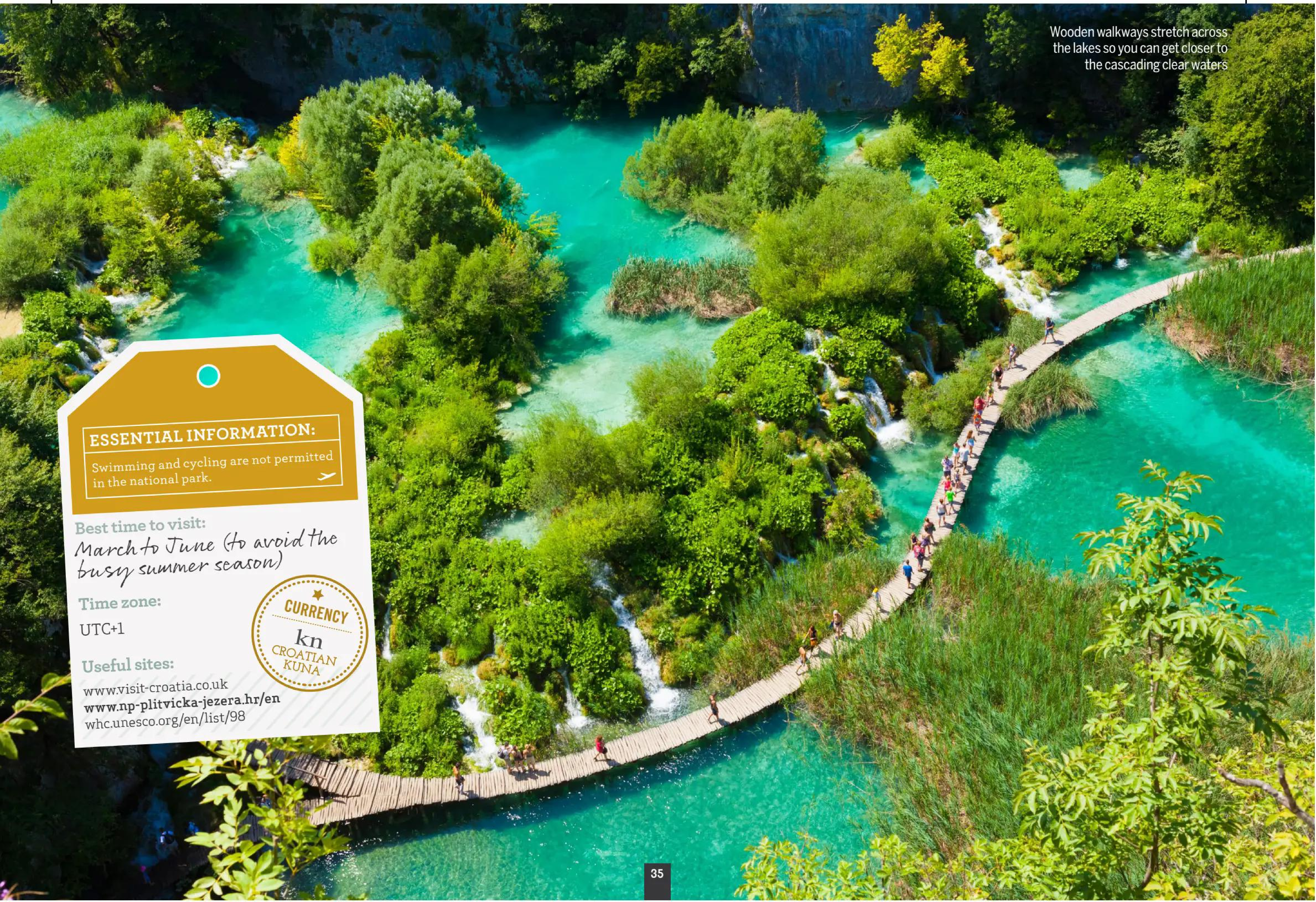
It was this incredible geology that saw the Plitvice Lakes granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 1979, and they are still Croatia's most popular tourist attraction. It's not only these breathtaking water features that visitors can enjoy, though, as the lakes actually only take up around one per cent of the entire Plitvice Lakes National Park – 300 square kilometres (116 square miles) of luscious forest that is home to many endangered species of wildlife.

The park is open all year round, and is well worth visiting no matter what the season. In summer you can marvel at the luscious greenery, in autumn enjoy the rich red and golden hues, and in winter see the waterfalls turn into beautiful ice sculptures as the landscape becomes a snowy wonderland.

With so much to see, it will take around eight hours to explore all of the lakes on foot. Therefore you may want to prolong your visit by staying in one of the hotels next to the park, or pitching up in its campsite. This will allow you to explore at your own pace, and ensure you don't miss the chance to stand beneath the park's largest waterfall, the 78-metre-tall (256-feet-tall) Veliki Slap, and walk among the amazing rock formations of the beautiful Šupljara cave.

There are seven different routes of varying lengths that you can take around the lakes, as well as a few hiking trails that will take you deep into the surrounding forests and meadows. However, if you're not feeling too energetic, you can make use of the free electric-boat ride across the serene Lake Kozjak, the park's largest lake, enabling you to get a closer look at the wildlife swimming in the clear waters. You can also hop on the free shuttle bus that can take you up to the highest points of the park for some truly breathtaking panoramic views.

Once you've seen the roaring waterfalls and peaceful lakes, there are plenty of restaurants and cafés where you can stop off to enjoy some delicious food and reflect on the majesty of this old and new natural wonder.



Wooden walkways stretch across the lakes so you can get closer to the cascading clear waters

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Swimming and cycling are not permitted in the national park.

Best time to visit:

March to June (to avoid the busy summer season)

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY
kn
CROATIAN KUNA

Useful sites:

www.visit-croatia.co.uk
www.np-plitvicka-jezera.hr/en
whc.unesco.org/en/list/98

21

THE GREEK ISLANDS

Embark on your own odyssey across Greece's many idyllic isles

Each one of Greece's 200-plus inhabited islands offers so much more than just sun, sea and sand. Every isle has a unique historical and cultural mix, and whether you're looking for a relaxing beach break, a fun-filled family trip, an enlightening sightseeing tour, or a break to party the nights away, there's a perfect Greek island out there for you – and finding out which one is your favourite is half the fun.

The picturesque islands are scattered across the Ionian Sea to the west of the mainland and the Aegean Sea to the east. They are divided by location into eight main groups: the Northwestern Aegean, Sporades, Evia, Argosaronic, Cyclades, Dodecanese, Crete and the Ionian Islands.

Crete is the largest of all the Greek islands, with a diverse range of landscapes from the central mountains to the coastal cities and beaches. There is a good variety of attractions that makes Crete one of the best islands for first timers. It's particularly unmissable if you're interested in history, archaeology and mythology, as it has the distinction of being home to the earliest European civilisation, the Minoans, and as such there are many excellent museums and historical points of interest to visit. The ruins of the Palace of Knossos near Heraklion are a fascinating archaeological site where the oldest city in Europe once stood. Legend has it that the palace complex contained the labyrinth where the Minotaur of Greek mythology lived.

Another history hotspot is Rhodes, part of the Dodecanese chain. Over the centuries, it has been shaped by Roman, Byzantine, Genoese, Ottoman and Italian influences. Visit the Medieval Old Town in the north and explore the winding, cobbled streets of the walled city.

Historical sites aren't the only reason to visit. Many of Greece's islands are great for water sports, but Prasonisi on the southern tip of Rhodes is renowned as one of the best locations in Europe, particularly for windsurfing and kitesurfing. Thanks to the different conditions of the surrounding seas – the calmer Mediterranean to the east and rougher Aegean to the west – Prasonisi is perfect for both beginner and more experienced surfers.

If you're looking for an island with spectacular scenery, it's a case of take your pick. Glorious sunshine, sparkling blue seas, beautiful beaches and delightful sugar-cube houses are a familiar theme. It's no surprise that Greek islands have caught the eye of Hollywood; they've provided the backdrop to films including *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (Kefalonia) and *Mamma Mia!* (Skopelos and Skiathos) among others.

Perhaps the most famous sight of all the Greek islands is the secluded cove of Navagio – commonly known as Shipwreck Beach – on the Ionian island of Zakynthos (Zante). The cove is a star of many postcards and brochures, and was voted one of the best beaches in the world in 2017. The rusty wreck is the focal point of the small stretch of white sand, which lies at the base of steep, tree-topped limestone cliffs surrounded by crystal-clear, turquoise-blue waters. The beach itself is only accessible by boat, but the best views are from the cliffs above, which can be reached by car or taxi, or a hike from the nearby village of Anafonitria.

For foodie travellers in search of the best in Greek gastronomy, restaurants and tavernas make the most of local ingredients to create specialities unique to each island. Highlights include the nation's deliciously simple eponymous salad; sweet pastries flavoured with honey, almonds, rose or lemon; hearty meat stews; and freshly caught seafood. And

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Plan to spend a couple of days at your last destination, in case of travel delays between islands.

Best time to visit:

Spring and autumn (to avoid peak season but still enjoy great weather)

Time zone:

UTC+2

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites:

visitgreece.gr/en

discovergreece.com

santorinidave.com/greek-island-hopping

The picturesque port town of Ermoupoli on Syros is the capital of the Cyclades

Santorini

With its postcard-perfect towns and famously spectacular sunsets, the Aegean jewel of Santorini is one of the most visited – and most beautiful – Greek islands.

The crescent-shaped Santorini and its neighbouring islands are the remnants of a largely submerged dormant volcano, which was responsible for one of the largest eruptions in recorded history around 3,600 years ago. This explosive event carved the island's steep cliffs, creating a natural theatre for watching the sun sink into the sea. The village of Oia, on the northern tip of the crescent, is the perfect place to experience some of the most breathtaking sunsets you will ever see.

Santorini should definitely be on the itinerary of any foodies. The island's restaurants pride themselves on the quality of the local ingredients, a result of the nutrient-rich volcanic soil. Santorini's fiery formation is also to thank for its striking red, white and black beaches.

It's no surprise that Santorini is a popular honeymoon destination – a choice of luxury hotels, intimate restaurants and the opportunity for long walks through winding cobbled streets make it the ideal place for a romantic getaway.

> Consider adding a few lesser-known islands to your travel plan

to drink why not indulge in some regional wine, ouzo or raki? You can also learn more about the local cuisine though cookery courses or demonstrations, and tours of vineyards and olive farms. Many of the islands offer these activities, so check when planning your trip to see what's available at the destinations you're visiting.

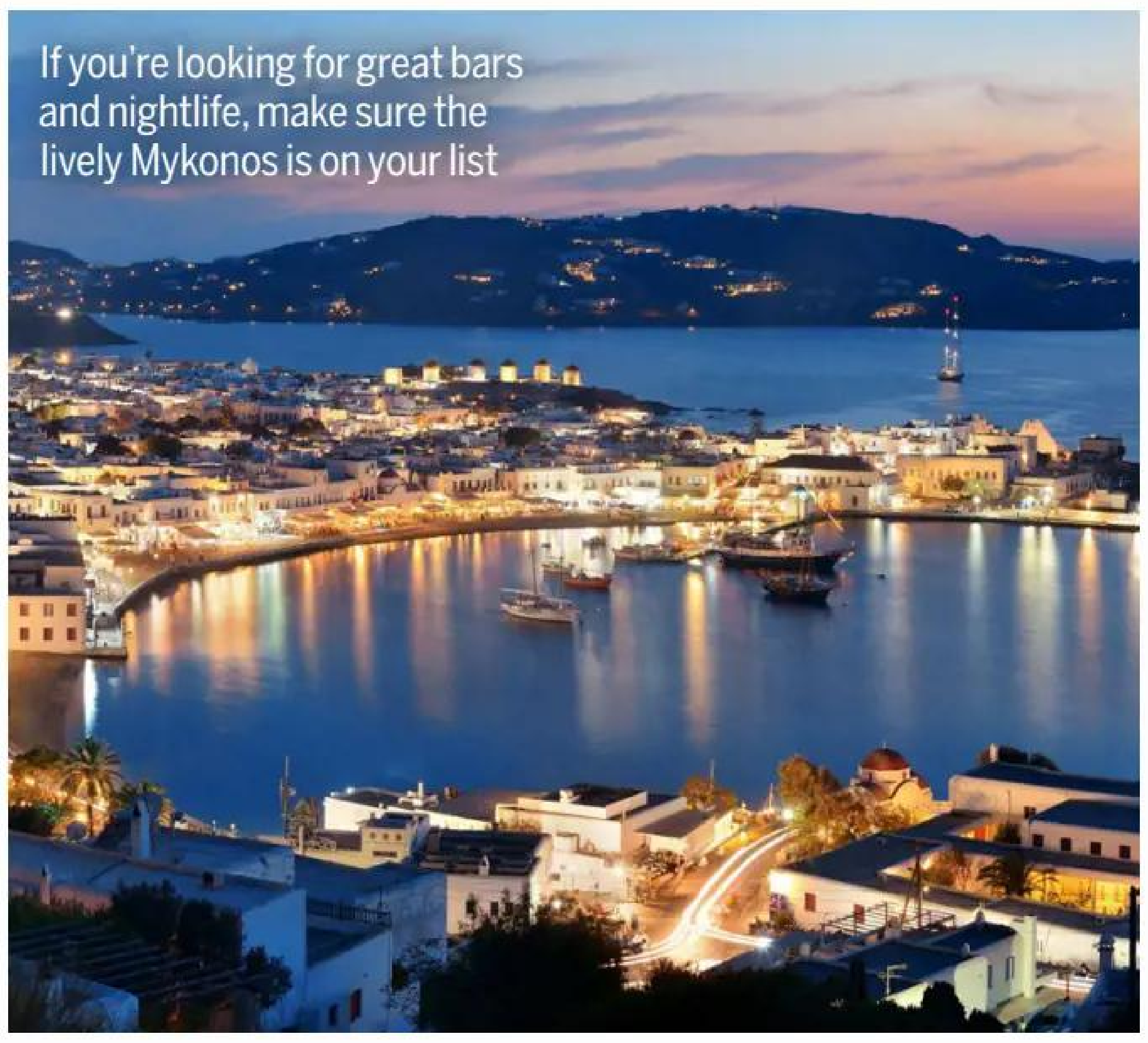
Another interesting stop for food fans and the health conscious is Ikaria in the North Aegean. It is one of the world's so-called 'Blue Zones', where around one in three residents live into their 90s and remain active well into old age. A significant factor in their longevity is the focus on cooking with fresh, local produce, so be sure to enjoy the island's food and wine here to get a taste of the traditional Ikarian diet and see what all the age-defying fuss is about.

For something quieter away from the typical tourist spots, consider adding a few lesser-known islands to your travel plan. The sandy beaches and bright-white rock formations of volcanic Milos, the pretty port town of Ermoupoli in Syros, and the peace and tranquillity of Kythira are just some of hundreds of wonderful destinations that can be found off the beaten track. Some of the smaller islands don't have much tourism infrastructure, which lets you enjoy a more authentic experience of Greek island life, but learning a few Greek phrases will come in handy, as English is not always widely spoken.

Island hopping is the best way to make the most of your trip by visiting multiple islands to experience their individual charms. Plenty of operators offer a range of set tours or the freedom to customise an individual itinerary tailored to what you want to see, how long you want to stay at each location, and whether you want to sail or fly between destinations.

Most islands are served by ferries, but not all of them are served by direct routes between one another, which might influence your choice or order of destinations. Travelling between islands in the same group is usually straightforward, however. Some of the larger islands (Crete, Mykonos, Santorini and Rhodes to name a few) have their own airports, so flying can be an option if you don't have great sea legs.

These suggestions are by no means exhaustive. With so many islands, Greece inevitably has far more to offer than we have space to cover. Perhaps you'll discover a new favourite or a hidden gem of an island on your next trip.



If you're looking for great bars and nightlife, make sure the lively Mykonos is on your list

Zakynthos's jagged coastline contains several secluded coves, the most famous of which is Shipwreck Beach

In Provence, discover the three sublime varieties of lavender the fields have to offer

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Parking in Provence is limited.

Best time to visit:

Late June to early August

Time zone:

UTC+1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites:

www.provenceguide.co.uk
www.theluberon.com
www.routes-lavande.com

22

LAVENDER FIELDS, PROVENCE

Lose yourself in the sensual rows of lavender as you wander France's blooming fields of Provence

The lavender fields of Provence make for a marvellous experience: as you stand in the expansive seas of purple, the soft, subtle smell of relaxation hits you like a cloud of sweet dreams. The bloom of the lavender fields in France has but a small window of opportunity in which it can be enjoyed every year, but it's worth the rush to take in this floral wonder.

Lavender typically begins to bloom around the time of the summer solstice, in the final weeks of June, and it is harvested by the end of July or mid-August at the latest. However, blooming depends on the variety, elevation and climate variations. Veteran visitors will recommend that for a quieter experience of the fields you visit before mid-July, but if you're not too fussy then by all means dive right in at the height of summer for a bloomin' lovely experience.

If you want to score yourself some quality lavender on your trip then head to the lavender capital of Sault. This southeastern village is the go-to spot for lavender enthusiasts, as winding roads weave through the lavender fields. On 15 August every year, a major festival is held celebrating the lavender plant, so to really get in the spirit, be sure to visit then. Another option is to head north from Sault to Montbrun-les-Bains, following the roads until you reach Barret-de-Lioure before coming back down to the tiny village of Ferrassières.

Outside of Sault, stick to the Luberon region – areas such as Gordes, Roussillon or Bonnieux – as well as the higher altitude lavender regions and the west and south areas of the Mediterranean – the Alpilles and Avignon. Avignon, Marseille and Monaco are popular base-points to depart from on guided tours to the local lavender fields. To immerse yourself in the experience, book a tour with the artisan growers who have been running family farms for generations, visit a distillery to learn about the harvesting process, or stop off at the Lavender Museum in Coustellet to learn more about the traditions of lavender farming in Provence so that you can walk away with information about the heritage of these farms to tell your friends.

The Medieval Abbaye de Sénanque, a Cistercian abbey near the village of Gordes in the Vaucluse, is a beautiful monument to visit where French monks grow lavender. However, parking is particularly limited so avoid peak times and either go first thing in the morning (before 9am) or in the evening (after 7pm) when large group tours are elsewhere.

You will also find fields of lavender perfection in the fertile hills of the Valensole Plateau. Down in Valensole village, you can browse the market stalls selling perfume and essential oils. Enjoy the scent of lavender in the air as you explore the cobbled streets here, and in the nearby Aix-en-Provence there are more stalls selling perfumes and essential oils to fill your suitcase with lavender goodies before you head home.

23 TBILISI

This medieval city in the heart of the Caucasus Mountains in Georgia is ready for the future

Tbilisi, a city whose fiery spirit was once repressed by its Soviet occupiers, is blooming. Along the Kura (Mtkvari) River, fancy hotels, lively nightclubs and world-class restaurants attract locals and tourists alike. Get a feel for Georgia's unique culture and beautiful language as you walk its streets, and listen to the Georgian music coming out of each bar.

This culture-rich city is now even easier to get to, with cheap inbound flights available from a number of European countries. Georgia is a fascinating country, a wild place that until a few decades ago, the world knew little about – and Tbilisi is the perfect place to start your tour.

The old town is a colourful and charming neighbourhood, small enough to explore by foot, but large enough to get serendipitously lost in. Its 19th-century wooden mansions – many featuring elaborate balconies for their owners to people-watch from – are all painted in an array of colours. They might look a little on the 'distressed' side, but trust us, it's part of their charm.

In fact, it almost looks like something out of a Disney film – and nowhere is this more apparent than at the Clock Tower. This leaning, higgledy-piggledy tower and its adjacent puppet theatre were built in 2010 by Rezo Gabriadze. Every hour, an angel comes out of the clock to ring the bell, and twice a day you can catch a show in the puppet theatre – we promise it's better than Punch and Judy.

Head out of the Old Town to Rike Park and then look up to the sky. Directly above you, you'll find the imposing Narikala fortress, which has protected the city and the Kura (Mtkvari) River valley since the 4th century. Inside its battlements, you can look around an Eastern Orthodox Church (restored in 1996), complete with lavish dome paintings. If you're feeling a touch adventurous, you can walk to the top – but it's much more fun to take the cable car from Rike Park, which was installed in 2012.

The cable car is just one example of Tbilisi's extensive efforts to modernise and keep pace with other cities in Europe. In another corner of Rike Park, you can find the uber-modern Peace Bridge across the Kura (Mtkvari). Built by the joint efforts of Georgian, French and Italian firms, the bridge symbolises the new Georgia.

But let's not forget that old-fashioned Georgia has its own merits, including the hot sulphur baths – perfect for soaking in at the end of the day. With a constant water temperature of 38 to 40 degrees Celsius (100.4 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit), it's pretty balmy in there – and also a little bit smelly. Don't let that put you off, though. The locals claim the warm, mineral-packed waters will cure a range of ills, from skin conditions to stress to insomnia.

Tbilisi's unique fusion of the old and the new works in perfect harmony with the relaxed Georgian lifestyle. But don't just take our word for it, go and experience it for yourself – this mountainous little country may just surprise and enchant you.

Dusk view of Narikala fortress, the Kura (Mtkvari) River and the old town in Tbilisi

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Taxis can try to charge extortionate rates, but public transport is efficient, safe and cheap.

Best time to visit:

May (so you can enjoy the annual Flower Festival)

Time zone:

UTC+4

CURRENCY

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GEORGIAN LARI

Useful sites:

www.visitgeorgia.ge/about-georgia/tbilisi/
www.georgia.travel/
www.georgiaabout.com/tag/tbilisi/

Mountains set the scene in this culturally rich city, with plenty for adults and children to explore

24

REYKJAVÍK

Journey to Iceland's capital to experience breathtaking scenery and spectacular natural wonders

Reykjavík is a city like no other. Backdropped by mountains and located along Iceland's south-western shoreline, embracing the constantly changing climate of the capital is all part and parcel of visiting one of the world's most exciting destinations.

The city is a cultural hub for those looking to get more familiar with Icelandic history, as well as its modern way of life. Featuring a wide array of museums to suit everybody's tastes, from The Settlement Exhibition, the Saga Museum and The National Gallery of Iceland, to the Whales of Iceland exhibition and the Reykjavík Museum of Photography, you're never without somewhere to visit on rainy days.

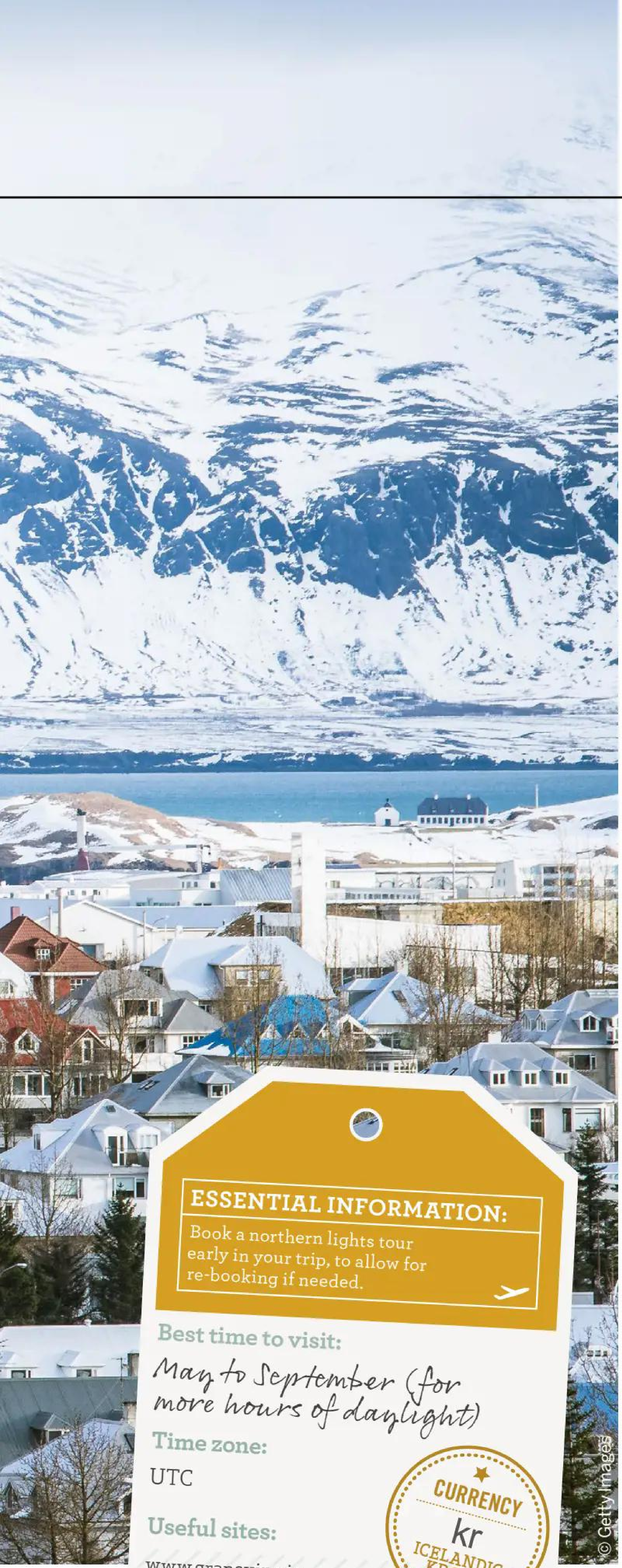
Treat your taste buds to some of the best fish and chips at the Reykjavík Fish Restaurant along the harbour, or chomp on a fresh hot dog at the little Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur stall. If you're feeling adventurous, try out some of Iceland's more traditional delicacies, including fermented shark (hákarl), lamb soup (kjötsúpa) and dried fish (harðfiskur).

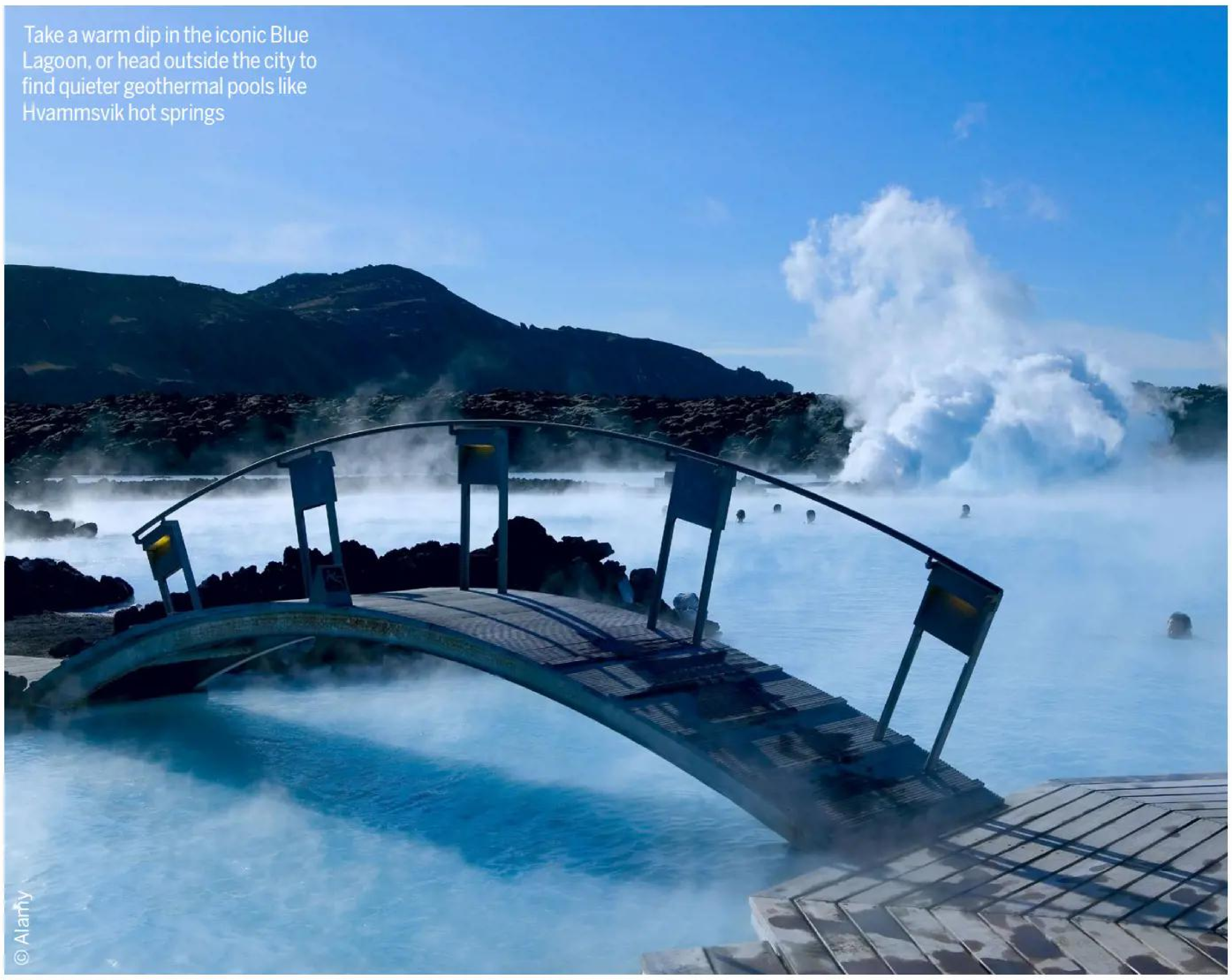
You can't visit Reykjavik without dipping your toes into a geothermal pool for instant relaxation and to soothe those sore muscles. The popular Blue Lagoon lies just a 50-minute drive away from the city centre, and will set you back around £70 ($95) entry per person. Or, for a budget-friendly alternative, locate one of the city's public swimming complexes, for example Vesturbæjarlaug, to enjoy a variety of hot pools at various temperatures for a fee of just £6 ($8) entry for adults.

Visit a Reykjavík Roasters café to enjoy expertly made coffee that will leave a lasting impression. Be wary, though, as shopping in Iceland comes with a hefty price tag. Sticking to a budget and looking for those deals where possible will make pennies stretch further. Use the AppyHour app to give you a list of all the pubs and restaurants that have deals running on drinks at any one time.

Treat Iceland's capital as a base to explore from, as most of the country's sights can be accessed through either organised tours or by hiring a rental car. A couple of days is all that's required to explore the city's highlights before heading out into the wild to witness majestic glaciers, gigantic waterfalls and exploding geysers.

Take a day out to explore the Golden Circle; a round-up of some of Iceland's most spectacular


© Getty Images


Take a warm dip in the iconic Blue Lagoon, or head outside the city to find quieter geothermal pools like Hvammsvik hot springs

© Alamy

natural wonders. Sights include the stunning Thingvellir National Park that, when visited during the snowy season, is truly a winter wonderland. Also featured on the tour is Gullfoss, a huge waterfall fed from a glacier that's visible in the background on a clear day.

A northern lights tour is a must for those visiting Iceland. A tour will typically last three to five hours. Don't forget to take your camera to capture the colourful natural wonder in all its glory, although buying photos from your tour organiser is sometimes an option. The lights look different on-camera than they do in person!

The fact that the number of tourists who visit Iceland each year outweighs the country's actual population by six times over is evident of just how popular this island has become as a destination to not miss out on.

> *Treat Iceland's capital as a base to explore the country from*

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Book a northern lights tour early in your trip, to allow for re-booking if needed.

Best time to visit:

May to September (for more hours of daylight)

Time zone:

UTC

CURRENCY

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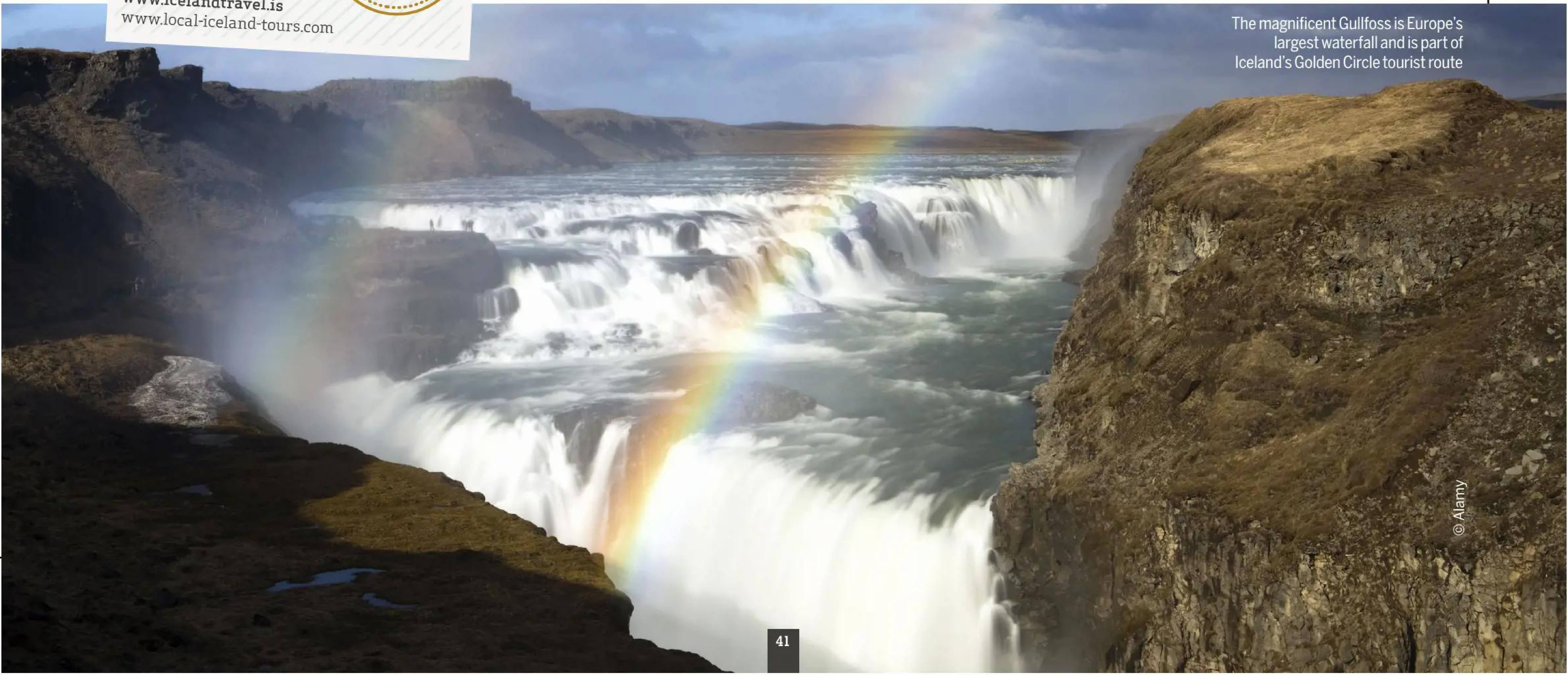
ICELANDIC KRONA

Useful sites:

www.grapevine.is

www.icelandtravel.is

www.local-iceland-tours.com


The magnificent Gullfoss is Europe's largest waterfall and is part of Iceland's Golden Circle tourist route

© Alamy

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16 OCT 2017
CAIRO EGYPT

AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

25

SAHARA DUNES

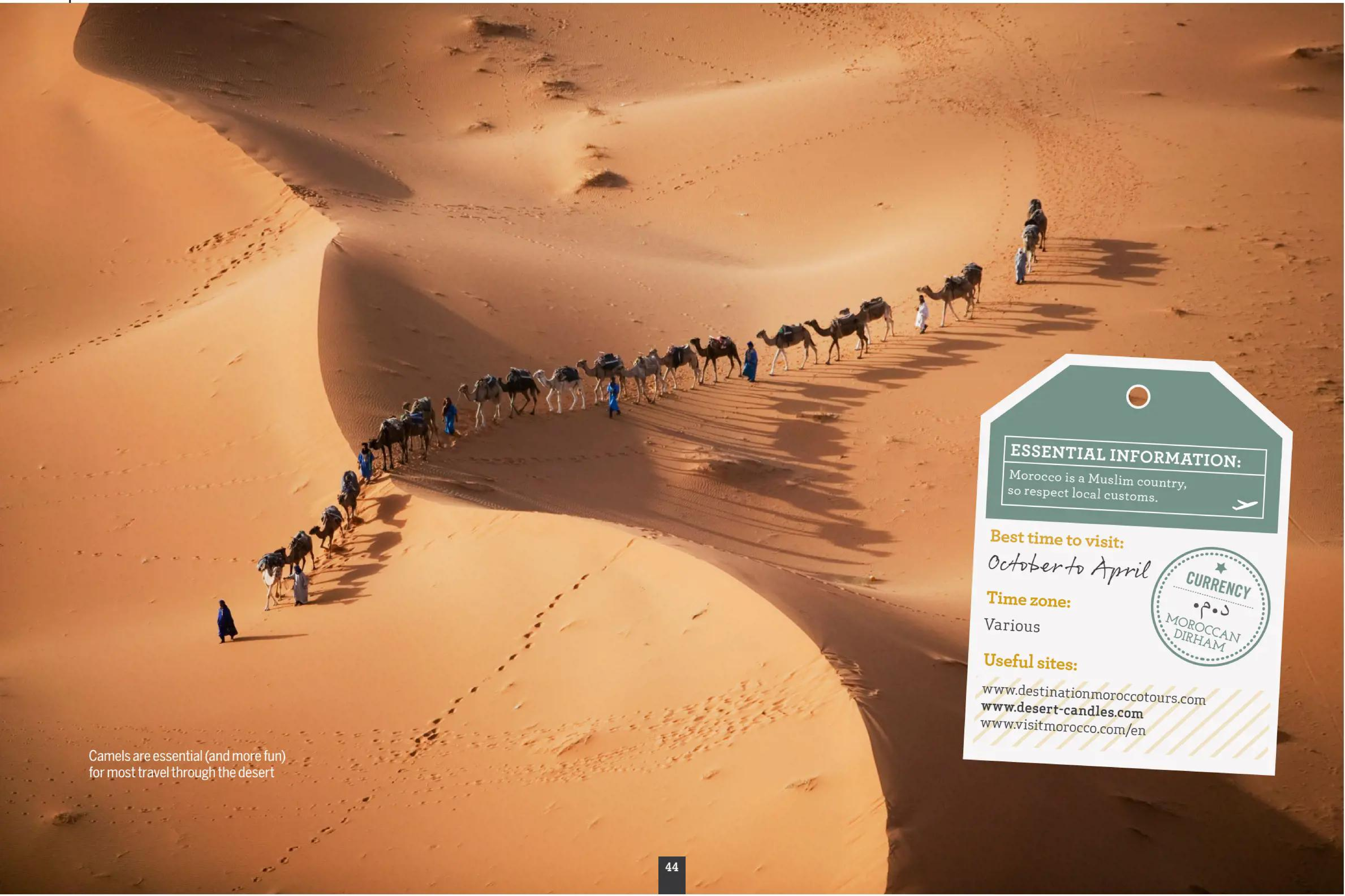
With extreme temperatures and shifting sand, the dune seas of the Sahara are an explorer's dream

At more than 9.2 million square kilometres (3.5 million square miles) covering ten countries and stretching across nearly a third of the African continent, the Sahara desert is bigger than the USA. You might be surprised to know that it's actually only the third largest desert in the world, after Antarctica and the Arctic, but it is the world's largest hot desert – and it's not all sand, sand, sand. Vast areas are covered by stony plateau known as hamada, and barren mountains. Between the rocks are relatively small patches of ergs, or dune seas, the most impressive of which pop up in Morocco.

This is lucky, as many others are only accessible via countries that Western governments strongly advise against travelling to, including Libya, Niger, Mali and parts of Algeria and Tunisia. A seasoned traveller might consider venturing beyond the furthest reaches of the tourist trail – it is just an advisory, after all. If you're feeling confident, check your local government website, as the political climate in some north African countries has fluctuated back and forth from red (no-go) to green (see advice).

Your likely port of entry to see a Saharan dune sea is via Morocco, for Erg Chebbi. The most common route tourists will take is via Marrakech, and if it's your first time there, then prepare yourself for a wonderful, albeit slightly intimidating, sensory overload. Spend a few nights acclimatising here, visit Jemaa el-Fnaa market, stock up on supplies and explore the local cuisine in the square. Maybe buy a few items of clothing if you feel unprepared: Morocco can get extremely hot, but daytime temperatures in spring and autumn can drop to the low teens and even less than 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit). If you haven't already booked a tour into Erg Chebbi in advance, then you'll find plenty of operators offering trips into the desert lasting several nights, which are often much cheaper than anything you'd book back home. What you save in cash, however, you might lose in peace of mind: unscrupulous local operators looking to gouge tourists or even just a few words lost in translation might mean you won't get the experience you hoped for. Again, if it's your first time in Morocco and you're not feeling confident about striking a bargain while you're out there, book your tour online from an approved operator. One thing to look out for when booking is the length of the trip, as a local operator might not advertise which erg they're taking you to, and just assume you want a trip out into the desert. A two-day tour will take you to Zagora and then back, but for Erg Chebbi, you'll want the three-day tour. Both begin on the same route and take you via the little trader town of Ouarzazate, but the three-day tour goes further and takes you to Merzouga. You'll get an overnight stay in a desert camp (an exhilarating experience, especially for first-timers) and evening meals are often included in the price.

While technically part of a sub-Saharan steppe and not a true desert, the dunes of Erg Chebbi do a pretty good impression of the actual



Camels are essential (and more fun) for most travel through the desert

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Morocco is a Muslim country, so respect local customs.

Best time to visit:

October to April

Time zone:

Various

CURRENCY

د.م.

MOROCCAN DIRHAM

Useful sites:

www.destinationmoroccotours.com
www.desert-candles.com
www.visitmorocco.com/en

Experienced travellers might consider the dunes of the Western Sahara, but beware, landmines dot this region

The days can get extremely hot, but nighttime in the desert can be very cold, too

A trip to the desert wouldn't be complete without a stay at an oasis

Sahara, which lies much further south. They rise dramatically out from the edge of Merzouga village and then continue across several horizons in all directions. It's around 40 kilometres (25 miles) long, and runs around eight kilometres (five miles) from east to west, a literal sea of rust to rose-gold-coloured sand depending on what time of day you're observing it, undulating to heights of up to 150 metres (492 feet). The Grande Dune de Merzouga is the mother of this dune sea, and can be distinguished from other dunes that rival its height by the thicket of tamarisk trees – a kind of flowering bush – found at its base. At the hotter times of year, the temperature out here can soar to over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), and the sand can get even hotter. Take a cue from the locals and cover up with light cottons, bring plenty of water and match your mealtimes with theirs. You might even consider being buried up to your neck in the hot sand for a short while – no joke! It's a natural local remedy for muscle and joint pains, and might be just the ticket after a long day walking or camel riding in the dunes.

If you've a bit more time in your schedule then a four-day excursion to Erg Chebbi could include a detour through the Atlas mountains to Todra Gorge, an impressive limestone canyon that towers 400 metres (1,312 feet) high in places. And before you make your return to Marrakech, a trip to the desert wouldn't be complete without a stay at an oasis: there's just the palm-grove-lined refuge from the desert you're looking for next to the town of Agdz, a few hours' drive along the old caravan route from Marrakech to Timbuktu.

For a longer dune sea tour and trip into a wilder part of the desert, Erg Chigaga, which lies further south of Erg Chebbi and around 64 kilometres (40 miles) off the nearest road, is a worthwhile visit. Here, the dunes make Erg Chebbi seem like ripples in a sand sea, with its grandest natural monuments soaring to 300 metres (984 feet). Because of its more inaccessible location, there are fewer visitors as well. It's two days by camel from the nearest town (M'Hamid) to the biggest dunes. You can make the trip quicker by renting a 4x4 vehicle, but this is more expensive. The only accommodation option you have in this remote region is a desert camp, but that's all part of the experience. You probably didn't commit to a desert adventure expecting five-star hotels, room service and a concierge... unless you're friends with a nomadic prince, of course.

Morocco will be the point of entry to the Sahara's many dune seas for most travellers

Haboob season

Sandstorms, or haboobs, are rare occurrences around the world, but when they do happen, the Sahara experiences them on a huge scale. They're typically formed in early summer when a dry, northeast wind flows across the desert, while moist monsoon air blows in over West Africa. When these two meet, huge thunderstorms can be triggered that can set off a haboob. These swirling masses of wind-blown sand have stretched over 1,600 kilometres (994 miles) wide in the past, and lifted sand a kilometre into the atmosphere. They're a fantastic sight to watch for the brave and possibly foolhardy; certainly something a daredevil stormchaser might want to tick off their bucket list, although sufficient eye protection and respiratory equipment is advisable. And a nearby bolthole, for really strong events.

For more than 1,000 years, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was the Cathedral of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Take care on the roads and always co-operate with the Turkish authorities.

Best time to visit:
April to November

Time zone:
UTC+3

CURRENCY
₺
TURKISH LIRA

Useful sites:
www.ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr/en
www.hagiasophia.com
www.howtoistanbul.com

26

HAGIA SOPHIA

Visit one of the oldest extant symbols of the Byzantine Empire in Turkey

The phrase 'third time lucky' could so easily have been coined for Hagia Sophia – a magnificent former place of worship that ended up being built three times. But the luck is actually with those who set eyes upon the final form we see today, for the ancient domes and minarets of this church-cum-mosque-cum-museum are a truly historic sight to behold.

Anyone standing and gazing upon this stunning landmark as it pierces the clear, blue sky of Istanbul is bearing witness to some 1,480 years of history. After all, Hagia Sophia is rightly considered to be one of the world's greatest man-made monuments, sitting proud in the city's Sultanahmet district as a symbol of past Byzantine might. It also bears the strong stamp of the 15th-century Ottoman invasion.

To that end, exploring Hagia Sophia is nothing short of a true delight. In many ways, it's a shame that there are no remnants of the original Greek Orthodox Christian Church that was constructed in 360 CE by Konstantios, a ruler in the Byzantine period, only to be burned to the ground following a riot 44 years later. Likewise, there are no remains of the building that subsequently re-emerged in 415 CE thanks to the efforts of Emperor Theodosius II – a structure that was later demolished following a riot.

What does exist, though, is simply jaw-dropping: a building in the image of Emperor Justinian I that was constructed between 532 and 537 CE in a city that was then called Constantinople. This was the place where new emperors were crowned in lavish ceremonies, and from where East Roman culture and politics flourished. It was the Empire Church and, as such, it was designed to be as opulent as it could possibly be.

How else to explain the building's huge 32-metre (105-foot) main dome, which is 56 metres (18 feet) from the floor and lets light reflect across the nave's interior? Or the columns and marbles taken from ancient cities around Syria and Anatolia? As a basilica, it was and remains filled with wonder. The impressive mosaics of the winged angels that cover the dome's supporting arches, and the 104 columns imported from the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, bear witness to that.

What is also striking is Hagia Sofia's size. When it was completed, it was the largest building in the known world, but it became even bigger when it was turned into an Ottoman imperial mosque following the invasion of 1432. The Ottomans fortified the structure, added supporting pillars, and complemented the building with four minarets as they set about an impressive Islamic refit. Yet they retained aspects of Christianity, such as a large mosaic of the Virgin and Child.

In 1935 the building was turned into a museum and opened to tourists, who flocked in large numbers. Even so, there was a groundswell of opinion in Turkey that it should become a mosque once more. In July 2020 it was announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that the building would indeed revert to being a mosque, which may mean that visiting options are now more limited than previously.

27

KILIMANJARO

Gasp for air on the way up and have your breath taken away at the summit of Tanzania's gem

Nobody would expect you to rush when you encounter Mount Kilimanjaro for the first time. Although Karl Egloff darted to the top and scrambled back down in a breathtaking six hours and 42 minutes on 31 August 2014, it's likely you'll want to take your time, savouring every second of your experience upon Africa's highest mountain.

In truth, you'll have little choice. With a summit stretching to 4,900 metres (16,000 feet) from the mountain's base, and 5,895 metres (19,340 feet) above sea level, scaling this natural giant will make you feel like you're on top of the world. But it will also leave you at risk of altitude sickness, making this an adventure that needs much preparation to enjoy it safely.

Is the effort worth it? You bet it is. You'll have left the warm earth of Tanzania, been buffeted by the winds, and likely sloshed with rain as you climb steadily higher, motivated by your group (for this is no solo activity). But when you've reached the summit, you'll also find your face wet with tears – through the sheer ecstasy of a great personal achievement. It's little wonder, then, that Mount Kilimanjaro is a popular peak, a dormant volcano situated in the Kilimanjaro National Park of Tanzania that attracts 25,000 climbers each year. It rises above the snow line, and is crowned with a coating of the white stuff across its three volcanic cores of Kibo, Mawenzi and Shira. There is also rainforest, alpine desert, heath and cultivated land.

Up high, distances are deceiving. What appears to be close can take a good couple of hours to reach. It gives a sense of the scale of the mountain, dotted, as it is, with caves and ridges. Should you camp at Mawenzi Tarn, near the base of Mawenzi, you'll also enjoy Kilimanjaro's permanent lake. With different plants and animal species to encounter across the stunning landscapes, Kilimanjaro is nothing if not scenic and life-affirming.

In order to climb successfully, vital equipment is needed, like a waterproof jacket, a down jacket, hiking boots, thermals, waterproof trousers, gloves, a balaclava, a duffle bag, a head torch and a water reservoir. Since you'll be taking your time, you'll also need protection against the cold nights. A sleeping bag and roll mat will help you kip so that you're ready to push yourself to new heights the next day.

There are, thankfully, facilities along the way in the established camps: this is, after all, a path already well trodden (since 1889, in fact, when Hans Meyer and Ludwig Purtscheller became the first to reach the summit). You'll also be helped by guides and porters who will carry so much stuff for you. The porters will go on up ahead, setting up camp where you'll be able to relax with some games of cards, a hot dinner and some acclimatisation walks.

Perhaps just as important, though, are the friends you will make. Others will naturally help you, and there will be great camaraderie as you all embark on a shared journey of a lifetime. When you finally get to take in that sunrise, you will find the effort more than worthwhile. Chances are, you'll not want to come back down in a hurry.

Mount Kilimanjaro is the world's largest free-standing mountain, and almost all types of ecological system can be found there

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Make sure you're physically fit before you embark on any climb.

Best time to visit:
January to March, and June to October

Time zone:
UTC+3

CURRENCY
TSh
TANZANIAN SHILLING

Useful sites:
www.climbmountkilimanjaro.com
www.ultimatekilimanjaro.com/index.htm
www.climbkilimanjaroguide.com

28 SPITZKOPPE

These formations in the Namib Desert offer a glimpse into a prehistoric past

Namibia is a land of endless horizons, of untamed desert and wild Africa. Even by geological standards, this is an ancient land. Towards the western coast of the Namib Desert, rising from a vast flat plain is a series of bald granite peaks – a natural monument so primordial that it was the site in *2001: A Space Odyssey* where man first discovers tools.

This is Spitzkoppe, or 'Pointed Dome', an oasis of reddish rounded bornhardt rock peaks, towering 1,784 metres (5,853 feet) high. Nicknamed the 'Matterhorn of Africa', the mountain is a mecca for climbers. Formed 700 million years ago, it was eroded 130 million years ago into the dreamy island formation we see today. The hunter-gatherer bushmen who lived here as far back as 2,000 BCE left behind stone artefacts and rock art that appear to depict rain-making rituals. Rain transforms the plains surrounding Spitzkoppe and the adjacent Pontok mountains into life-giving grassland.

Though the mountain might have posed a serious challenge when first summited in 1946, today it welcomes hikers of all levels. Tougher ascents require true grit, taking climbers up friction slabs and cracks over more than 100 traditional and bolted routes. No matter how hardened, mountaineers will find themselves overjoyed with the range of landscapes to navigate. One can only truly appreciate the scale of the island peaks by negotiating a long crack, or hanging from a steep cliff, with the vast desert seeming to stretch forever into the distant horizon. From the ground, such hardy explorers look like ants.

However, even on foot there's plenty to explore, with arch and rock pools, caves and all manner of geological formations. While novices can fill their boots strolling the five-hour Pontok trail to a lookout point atop Spitzkoppe, the Matterhorn Route is an eight-hour scramble. Meanwhile, the seven-hour Bushman Circle takes trekkers up chains to Bushman's Paradise, home to one of Namibia's most prolific rock art collections.

For the solace-seekers, Spitzkoppe is also a bona fide bird-watching bonanza. While the mountaineers are off scrambling, birding enthusiasts can busy themselves searching the cliffs for the quirky Rüeppell's bustard, Stark's lark, Layard's warbler and even the endemic Herero chat.

There are a number of camping options in the area – from the bungalows of the local community Spitzkoppe Camp to the minimalist chalets of Spitzkoppen Lodge, complete with swimming pool. The latter is perfect for those seeking a balance of hearty outdoor adventure and modern comforts. Hot showers and restaurants are the name of the game in an area otherwise devoid of food and drink outlets. However, many prefer to pitch a bush camp and rough it in perhaps the greatest outdoors of them all.

With one of the world's most impressive palettes to play with, the sunset over the mountains is nothing short of a genuine spectacle. However, the headline act starts at nightfall when an unpolluted sky opens up the heavens, revealing a celestial performance one can only experience in the heart of Africa.

A series of granite peaks bursting from the plains of the Namib Desert, the Spitzkoppe reaches 1,784 metres (5,853 feet) high

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Visitors hoping to hike or climb should book a guide.

Best time to visit:

The weather is coolest from June to September

Time zone:

UTC+2

CURRENCY

$/R

NAMIBIAN DOLLAR/ SOUTH AFRICAN RAND

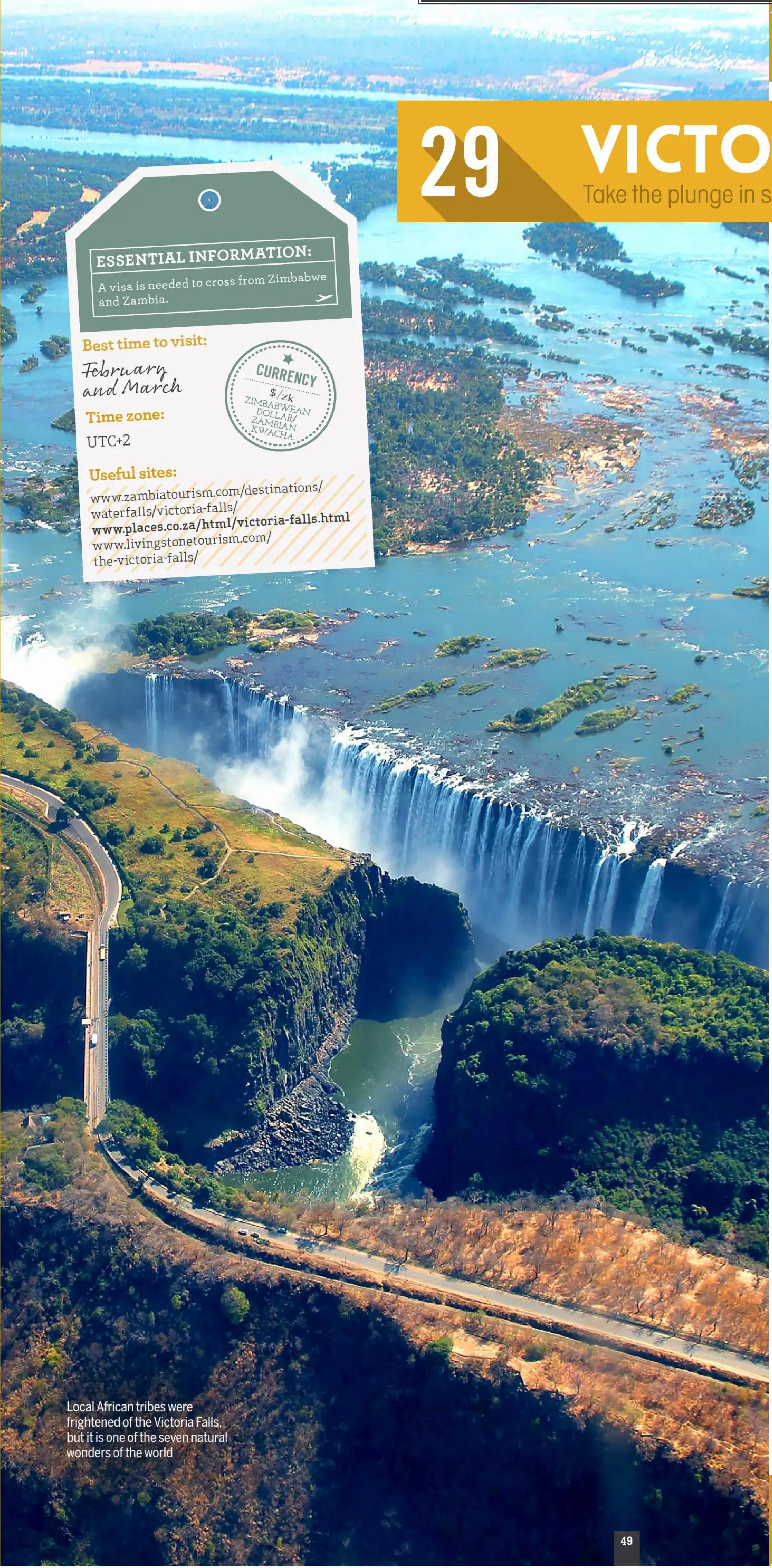
Useful sites:

www.spitzkoppe.com
www.spitzkoppenlodge.com
www.alardsbigwallclimbing.com/namibia.htm

29

VICTORIA FALLS

Take the plunge in southern Africa at the world's largest waterfall



Local African tribes were frightened of the Victoria Falls, but it is one of the seven natural wonders of the world

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

A visa is needed to cross from Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Best time to visit:

February and March

Time zone:

UTC+2

CURRENCY
$/zk
ZIMBABWEAN DOLLAR/
ZAMBIAN KWACHA

Useful sites:

www.zambiatourism.com/destinations/waterfalls/victoria-falls/
www.places.co.za/html/victoria-falls.html
www.livingstonetourism.com/the-victoria-falls/

Before you even reach Victoria Falls – the spectacular 108-metre (354-foot) waterfall on the Zambezi River in southern Africa – you will see huge columns of spray rising some 500 metres (1,640 feet) into the sun-kissed air. You'll also hear the incredible thunder of the water as it cascades over the lip of a large basalt plateau. Little wonder the original name for this unique sight was Mosi-oa-Tunya, which literally means 'the smoke that thunders'.

Victoria Falls got its current, most widely used name thanks to the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone back in 1855, in honour of Queen Victoria. It straddles the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, where it is bound by low sandstone hills, and it turns what is a generally placid river into a pounding torrent as more than 500 million cubic metres of water plunges into the gorge.

As such, it's something of a natural foaming monster that oozes beauty not only in its own inherent splendour, but also in the rainbows that it forms thanks to the dazzling sunlight. It can be a little frightening in its scale, but there are inviting spots close by for the brave, particularly on the Zambian side near to the 'devil's cascade', where you can enjoy a crystal-clear, natural swimming pool.

There is also a jaw-dropping bungee-jumping location if you're feeling particularly daredevil. For this, you'd join around 50,000 people each year in leaping from a British-built steel road and rail bridge overlooking the waterfall, cutting through the magical mists as you hurtle towards the Zambezi River, saved only by the rebound of the cord as the adrenaline pumps inside your body.

For the less brave, the curtain of falling water can be merely observed as you wander along a path that cuts along the forest edge, pausing at the Knife Edge Bridge for a perfect view of the Eastern Cataract and the experience of the upward shooting spray. A rain coat is a useful accessory, as is a head for heights since you'll be 128 metres (420 feet) above the river. Meanwhile, in the dry season, there is also a chance to walk along the top of the Eastern Cataract and enjoy the same view Livingstone had way back when.

For the rest of the year, there is no such opportunity, as the water roars at its splendid best. But hike down the gorge, underneath the Victoria Falls Bridge, and you'll be able to see the cascading water from the base – a spectacular viewpoint, although it's certainly not a journey for the unfit since it takes you across some hazardous terrain, and involves some swimming and rafting.

A good alternative is to take a helicopter ride to see the falls in their glory from above or visit the various museums to get a sense of history in the area. The Victoria Falls Field Museum reveals the formation of the falls and the heritage of the region, while the David Livingstone Museum houses a huge range of memorabilia, from authentic maps to diaries.

30 SOSSUSVLEI

The salt and clay pans of Sossusvlei are a canvas for a masterpiece of metamorphosis; life in motion

Red waves of sand lap up and down towards the horizon; interspersed with cracked earth, sprouting dead trees. Snakes bury themselves beneath the dunes, awaiting unsuspecting geckos; while oryx search for scraps, and leopards scan the horizon. This is Sossusvlei; a barren salt and clay pan, littered with wild bursts of life tucked away in Namibia's Namib-Naukluft National Park, the largest conservation area in Africa.

The park's entrance rapidly opens into Sesriem Canyon, shaped by the Tsauchab River. It is a walkable labyrinth of surreal rock formations, interspersed with pools of water. However, this is where such comforts end and the Sossusvlei begins. The pan is named after the local Nama name for 'dead-end' and the Afrikaans word for 'marsh' – as this marks the point where the salt and clay pans conspire with the dunes to stop the Tsauchab River in its tracks.

Ironically, the further away you travel from this water, the more the park comes to life. Though under the new light of the rising sun, the desert may appear to glisten in golden slumber, make no mistake – it is restless.

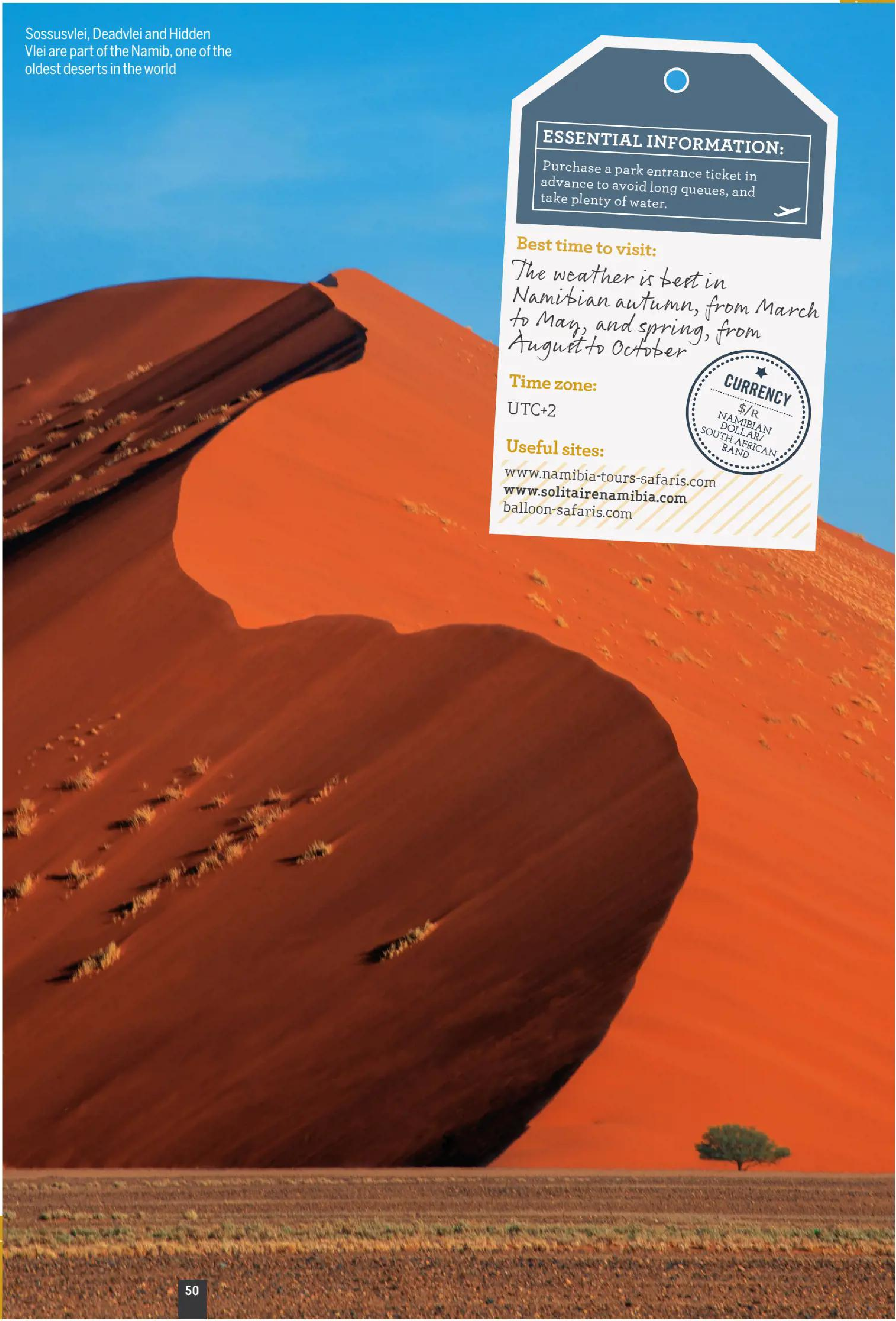
With more than 31,900 square kilometres (123,000 square miles) of distinctive red sand, Sossusvlei is home to some of the world's largest dunes. Rich in iron oxide, these sands have travelled far and wide to arrive here – first carried by the Orange River to the Atlantic Ocean, before being thrown inland by the wind. Occasionally, petrified dunes erupt from the landscape, a billion years in the making.

The photogenic Dune 45, named after its distance from the gate at Sesriem Canyon, rises 85 metres (279 feet) high – towering above multiple-armed 'star dunes'. Conquering its slopes is a unique challenge, for each step requires extra effort to overcome the collapsing suction of the sand. From the top, you can see dunes stretch towards the horizon, interlaced with animal tracks. However, the real challenge is Big Daddy: a whopping 325-metre (1,066-foot) beast, requiring little more than grit and water.

When it rains, the pans form spectacular watering holes, enabling flowers to bloom up the dunes. However, even in the most arid conditions, life can still thrive. Camel thorn trees sprout from the sands, as do nara melons; a crucial source of nourishment. Welwitschia spew out onto the pan, thousands of years old; so remarkable and yet so bizarre, they truly would seem better placed in Frank Herbert's world of *Dune*.

However, just a three-kilometre (1.8-mile) stroll away, the scorched skeletons of camel thorn trees, rising from the bleached floor of Deadvlei, are a stern reminder of the unforgiving nature of the climate. In the afternoon, the low, open Hidden Vlei provides solace; a reprieve from the crowds and a moment to reflect.

As sunset approaches, the porcupines and foxes scurry out, and Sossusvlei closes its gates to the world. The only way to get in early and leave late is to stay at the sole resort within the national park: Sossus Dune Lodge – a collection of 25 afro-village style chalets. After a long day filling boots with sand, the only way is up – to stare at the African sky.



Sossusvlei, Deadvlei and Hidden Vlei are part of the Namib, one of the oldest deserts in the world

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Purchase a park entrance ticket in advance to avoid long queues, and take plenty of water.

Best time to visit:

The weather is best in Namibian autumn, from March to May, and spring, from August to October

Time zone:

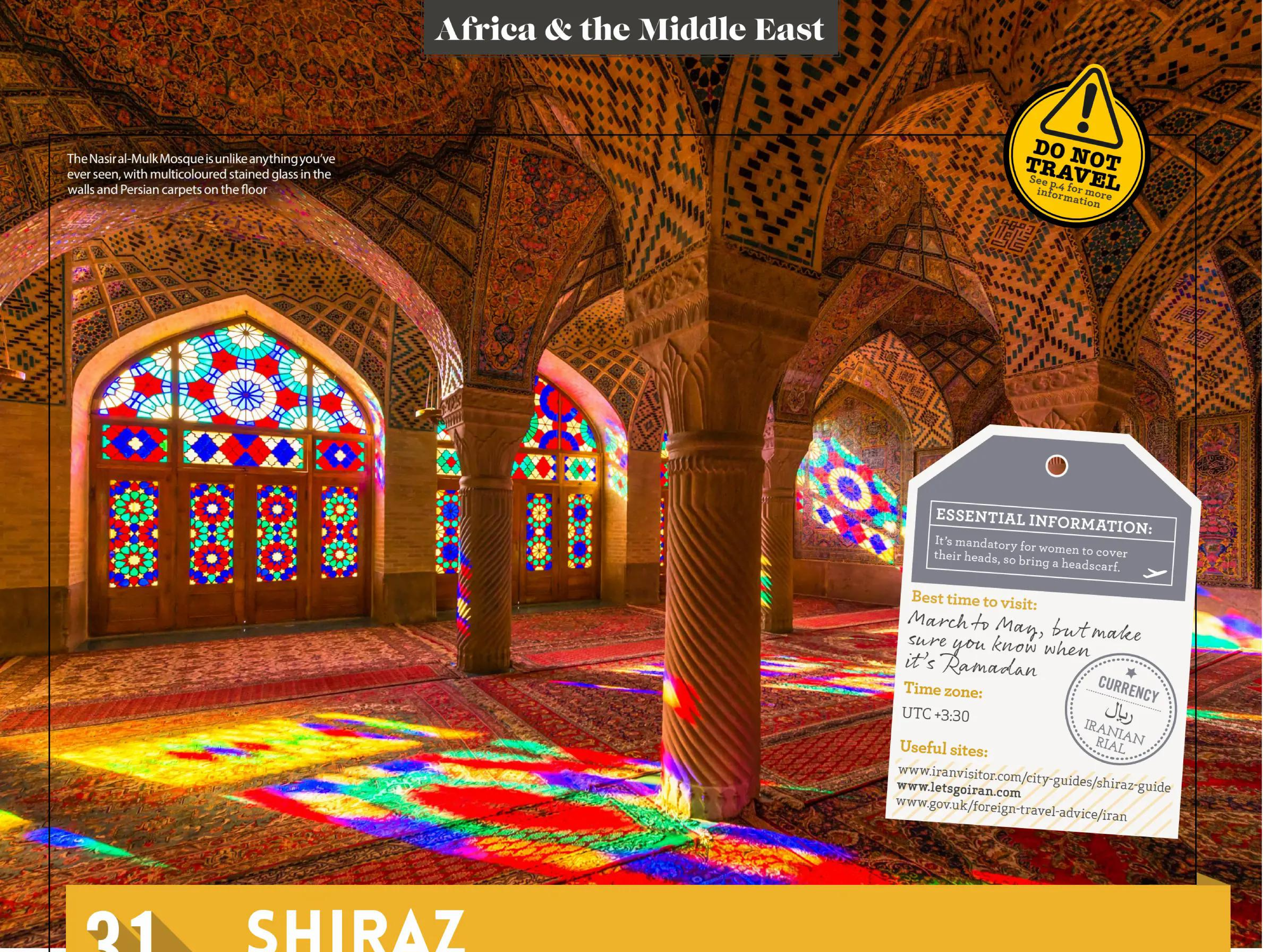
UTC+2

CURRENCY

$/R
NAMIBIAN DOLLAR/
SOUTH AFRICAN RAND

Useful sites:

www.namibia-tours-safaris.com
www.solitairenamibia.com
balloon-safaris.com



The Nasir al-Mulk Mosque is unlike anything you've ever seen, with multicoloured stained glass in the walls and Persian carpets on the floor

DO NOT TRAVEL
See p.4 for more information

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
It's mandatory for women to cover their heads, so bring a headscarf.

Best time to visit:
March to May, but make sure you know when it's Ramadan

Time zone:
UTC +3:30

CURRENCY
ریال
IRANIAN RIAL

Useful sites:
www.iranvisitor.com/city-guides/shiraz-guide
www.letsgoiran.com
www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/iran

31

SHIRAZ

You may know it as a red wine, but Iran's city of Shiraz is richer than any glass under the sun

Iran might not feature high up on your travel bucket list, but it really should. This beautiful country has gained an unfair reputation since the outbreak of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – a dangerous and lawless place, where women are oppressed, and everything that was once worthwhile reduced to dust. But this couldn't be further from the truth. While the Iranian government is notoriously theocratic, Iran has been a stable place in recent years, and is now mostly safe for tourists to visit.

Iran has some of the oldest historical landmarks in the world, and the city of Shiraz is right at the heart of it all. Even if you think you're accustomed to the stunning beauty of Islamic art and architecture, wait until you come to Shiraz; it will still wow you. If you look for it, you'll find beauty around every corner.

Perhaps the most iconic image from Shiraz is the rainbow glass found in the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque. Standing by its glorious stained windows, with the light shining through, is just like being inside a jewellery box. Built in the late 19th century by the decadent Qajar ruling dynasty, the decoration certainly befits its creators' lavish tastes.

Stroll down the road a little bit to get a glimpse of another gleaming treasure – the Shah Chéragh, a tomb of two important figures in Shia Islam. It's said the two brothers took refuge in the city during a persecution of Shias, and this funerary monument to them was built in the 12th century. Inside the blue dome, an emerald chamber filled with tiny mirrors glitters when it catches the light – and we promise it's one of the most jaw-dropping sights to be found in the entire Islamic world.

Shiraz is also the nearest major city to the ancient Persian site of Persepolis, built by Darius I and Xerxes the Great. Definitely one of the most impressive sights of the ancient empire, Persepolis gives you a taste of the might of the ancient Persian Empire, which once spanned from Greece to Pakistan.

In addition to its historic and religious sites, Shiraz was an artistic city, known for its poets and landscape artists. The Tomb of Hafez was built to commemorate one of Persia's most famous poets, and inside the garden and its wonderfully adorned pavilions, locals congregate to chat and watch the sun go down over their stunning city.

If you're looking for your own Garden of Eden, Shiraz may be the closest you ever get to it. Known as Iran's garden city, the streets wind their way around bountiful green spaces and parks. Built by the fabulously wealthy shahs and merchants, many of these slices of paradise surround the former summer houses of the rich and famous.

The Qavam House is a great example of this. In its luxurious and cool interior, you'll see rooms intricately tiled from floor to ceiling, decorative glass all around, and many comfortable chairs that are perfect for taking a break from the heat. Step outside into its Eram Garden, and dip your feet into the perfectly symmetrical fountains bubbling with turquoise water – it's hard to believe you're in Iran, isn't it?

32

THE GREAT PYRAMIDS OF GIZA

One of the Seven Wonders of the World, visit Egypt's marvellous display of wealth and power

Across the globe, seven locations are home to a special group of classical monuments celebrated for their structural magnificence and historical importance: the Colossus of Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Olympia's Statue of Zeus, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, and the Great Pyramids of Giza all make up the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. While all were impressive in their heyday, only one remains largely intact. That specific champion of the ancient world is also the oldest of all its siblings, making it an impressive and intriguing display of royal appreciation that stands proudly on a plateau on the southwestern outskirts of Egypt's famous capital of Cairo. Welcome to the Great Giza Pyramid Complex.

Three limestone pyramids make up the fascinating wonder: Khufu's pyramid (otherwise known as the Pyramid of Khufu and Pyramid of Cheops), the pyramid of Khafre, and the pyramid of Menkaure. Adjacent to this structure, the Sphinx monument is dedicated to an unknown Egyptian royal. Khufu's pyramid is the oldest and largest of the three in the Giza Necropolis at 138.8 metres (455 feet) in height, and it has been estimated by experts to have taken 20 years to construct, ceasing in 2560 BCE. The structure is believed to have been ordered by the second ruler of the Fourth Dynasty, Pharaoh Khufu, who ruled from 2609–2584 BCE.

The pyramid was built with such sophistication that for thousands of years it was believed to have been built by aliens, although now it seems more probable that Khufu's vizier, Hemon, or Hemiunu, was the architect. Creator aside, many still debate the techniques used in its construction, as experts estimate that 800 limestone blocks would have had to have been hoisted per day in the blazing sun. It is a true testament of architectural genius, and for almost 4,000 years, the Great Pyramid was the tallest man-made structure in the world until the creation of the skyscraper domineered the skies. Although the Great Pyramid was originally covered by casing stones that formed a

Khafre was a pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty and the son of Khufu

The Great Giza Complex is made up of three pyramids of varying sizes dedicated to the great pharaohs of Egypt

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Vendors are reportedly fairly aggressive and desperate for customers.

Best time to visit:

September to April (for more withstandable temperatures)

Time zone:

UTC+2

CURRENCY

£

EGYPTIAN POUND

Useful sites:

www.egypt.travel/en/attractions/giza-plateau
www.cairotravel.com
www.marvelousegypttravel.com

Inside the Giza Pyramids you will discover ancient hieroglyphs inside tombs

It is a true testament of architectural genius

smooth outer surface, what is seen today is the underlying core structure.

The second tallest pyramid in the complex is the pyramid of Khafre at 136.4 metres (447.5 feet) tall. This is the tomb of the Fourth-Dynasty pharaoh Khafre, Khufu's son, who ruled during the 'golden age' of the Old Kingdom of Egypt from 2520 to 2494 BCE. The last of the three structures belongs to Menkaure, Khafre's son and Kufu's grandson, and it was the last of the pyramids to be built in the Great Giza complex for the pharaohs who ruled between 2575 and 2465 BCE. For thousands of years, these pyramids have been the subject of much speculation and investigation, having captivated the intellectual minds of people for centuries. To travel to the necropolis is an experience many dream of doing, and it's easy to understand why.

The city of Giza is about 16 kilometres (ten miles) west of Cairo, Egypt's capital, and it's on the west bank of the River Nile. In order to fully experience the awe and wonder of the pyramids, try to spend a night in a nearby hotel where the structure is visible from your room so that you can wake up with the pyramids greeting you first thing in the morning. Before you set out, you'll also need to consider what you're going to wear. Egypt is a Muslim country, and while shorts and a T-shirt are generally fine, remember to be respectful. You'll also need to make sure you adopt appropriate footwear, as much of the experience requires you to be on your feet.

Staying close by serves two purposes, as it is less hassle to walk to the pyramids than to drive or get a taxi. Having the pyramids within walking distance means that you can travel on foot and be in charge of your own experience. If taking a taxi, beware as taxi drivers have been known to overcharge visitors for fares to the site. If you do decide to get a taxi to the pyramids, agree a price with your driver before you set off, or consider using Uber. If you are staying in Cairo then the journey is approximately an hour by taxi. You can also catch a bus from the capital.

It is advised that you travel as part of a group, particularly if it is your first time in the area. Before you even reach the vicinity of the pyramids, vendors offering horse and camel rides to the entrance eagerly await your custom. The pyramids of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure are situated in the shade-free dessert, so saving your energy and travelling on horseback is a smart idea, but don't be pressured into it by the vendors if you would prefer to walk or be driven. At the site, there will be a lot of people trying to sell souvenirs – don't be alarmed at their pushy natures. If you're not interested in something they are selling, politely decline them with a smile and move on.

Using a paid guide on your tour will ensure that your experience of the pyramids will be a good one. Only a true Egyptologist will be able to bring the story of the Egyptian kings and queens to life through their experienced knowledge of the site, so they are worth investing in. Despite the age of the pyramids, the pharaohs' tombs are still in remarkable condition and, unlike many other historic monuments sealed off with red tape and 'keep out' signs, the narrow corridors, chambers and galleries are still largely open to the public for exploration. However, anything of any value has been removed and can usually be found in the national museums.

The rules of what you can and can't do in and around the pyramids tend to vary depending on the type of tourist you are and the type of patrolmen around at the time, but it is best to be respectful and up-front about your intentions and what you would like to get out of your visit, be it a picture of the tombs or a glance inside the tomb itself. Legally, you are not allowed to climb the pyramids – a German teacher disregarded the strict laws in 2016 and scaled the monument, promptly receiving a lifetime ban from visiting the site. But don't let that put you off – go and soak up the experience of the pyramids, and the sun while you're at it. It's the historical holiday of a lifetime.

33

The Great Sphinx

Crafted from limestone with the body of a lion and the head of a human, the Sphinx structure outside of the necropolis is an amazing addition to the Great Giza complex. Lying from west to east, it is thought that the structure, which stands at approximately 20 metres (66 feet) tall, was built as early as 2500 BCE. However, unlike the pyramids themselves, not very much is known about the colossal royal monument. As a result of this lack of knowledge about it, it is not only the largest monolithic statue and the oldest known monumental structure, but it is also attached to some of the biggest mysteries in Egyptian history. When was it actually built? Who built it? Why did they build it? Who broke the nose? Who is the monument dedicated to? While some believe it was dedicated to a pharaoh, there is no strict evidence that provides us with a solid answer.

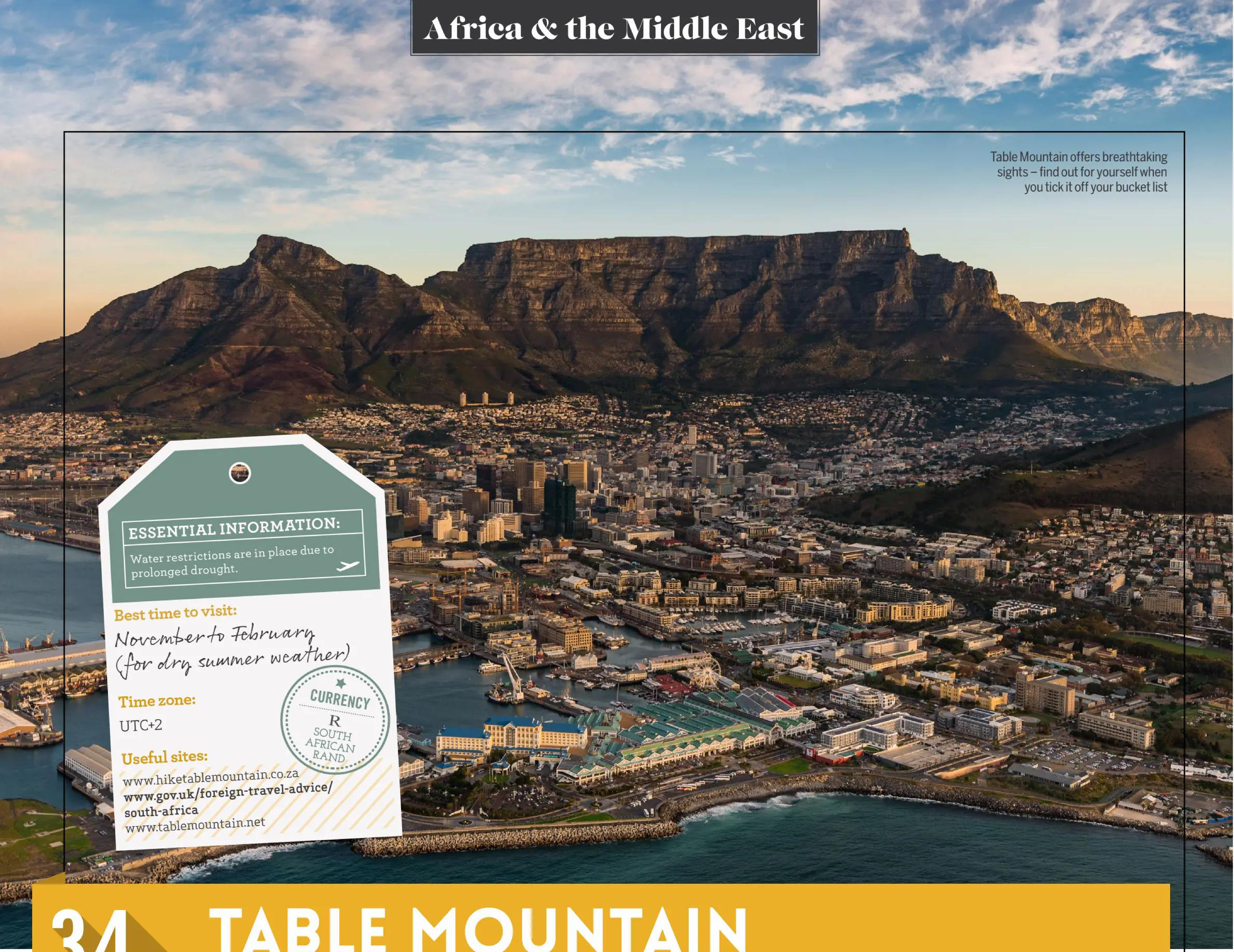


Table Mountain offers breathtaking sights – find out for yourself when you tick it off your bucket list

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Water restrictions are in place due to prolonged drought.

Best time to visit:

November to February (for dry summer weather)

Time zone:

UTC+2

CURRENCY

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Useful sites:

www.hiketablemountain.co.za
www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/south-africa
www.tablemountain.net

34

TABLE MOUNTAIN

Experience South Africa's beautiful Cape Town with a bird's-eye view

Looking out over South Africa's capital city of Cape Town from the famous Table Mountain, a clear day will offer a spectacular panoramic view of almost every amazing sight this country has to offer. Not only will you see the rest of the Table Mountain National Park, the home of the infamous landmark, but you will also see Table Bay, the Twelve Apostles Mountain Range, the V&A Waterfront, Mitchells Plain and the Cape Flats. You should also be able to spot Robben Island, the infamous prison island that once housed former president Nelson Mandela, and you can enjoy a bird's-eye view of the glorious Cape Town Stadium, which was built ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Free audio tours of the mountain are available that will be able to point out fascinating areas and deliver insightful trivia about the landscape. As well as the expansive views right under your nose, Table Mountain is a World Heritage Site, the single richest floristic area in the world and home to a number of fascinating animal species, many of which are endemic to the mountain region.

A common sight on Table Mountain's Dassie Walk is the rock hyrax, locally known as a dassie, a small furry animal belonging to the Provavidae family. Although it resembles a small rabbit, it is actually a hoofed mammal related to the elephant. Table Mountain is also home to porcupines, mongooses, snakes, lizards, tortoises and a rare endemic species of amphibian that is only found here: the Table Mountain ghost frog.

Climbing the mountain can be difficult due to the temperamental weather conditions that often bring the aerial cable cars to a halt, but a mild, clear day paves the way for tourists to explore a little piece of paradise all within three minutes flat. If you decide to ditch the cable cars and walk to the summit, then be prepared because although the distance is only three kilometres (1.86 miles) when starting at the parking lot two kilometres (1.24 miles) past the lower cable station, it is a steep and tough trek to the summit that requires an element of physical capability. This is definitely not a trek recommended for beginners as it is quite steep, and it's recommended that it be tackled at a steady pace. The route takes between one and three or more hours to complete.

There are amazing trails to and around the summit that offer the chance to explore the mountain further, such as the Dassie Walk, the Agama Walk, the Pipe Track, Platteklip Gorge, the Klipspringer Walk, the Skeleton Gorge Hike and many more. There are other longer walks available, while a short guided walk from the Twelve Apostles Terrace departs every hour between 9am and 3pm and is free of charge.

Always pay attention to the weather during your trek, and ensure that you stay as part of a group. If all goes smoothly, you will leave Table Mountain with much more appreciation for its natural beauty, along with a better understanding of the South African culture surrounding its most highly regarded natural wonder.

35

THE DEAD SEA

Do not let the word 'dead' put you off – there is plenty of adventure on the Jordanian border

The Dead sea, bordering the West Bank and Jordan, is a beautiful destination that will both surprise and amaze you. The startling blue waters are ten times saltier than the sea, consisting of 34 per cent salt. While its name reflects the brutality and hostility of its ecosystem – the sea is 'dead' due to its high salinity, which prevents fish and aquatic plants from living in it – it is an inviting location for hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. At 431 metres (1,414 feet) below sea level, the location is the lowest point on the entire planet, shared by Israel and the Palestinian Territories on the western side and Jordan on the east.

With water so saline that it takes on an almost silky texture, and air so rich in oxygen that it protects skin from sunburn, the natural beauty of this area is brimming with wonders and bursting with skin-friendly therapeutic minerals that reportedly combat the effects of aging and skin ailments. To truly experience the natural elements the Dead Sea has to offer, visitors should bask in the waters of Ein Bokek Beach. Nearby spas like the Ein Gedi Spa allow you to slather yourself in invigorating black mineral mud scooped from the floor of the Dead Sea.

Also to be discovered in close proximity is the Masada National Park. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, cable cars make for an easy ascension (290 metres (951 feet) in three minutes) to the ruins. Located on the far edge of the Jordanian desert, Masada (Hebrew for 'fortress') is an ancient fortification steeped in a riveting history. The area is the dramatic backdrop for one of the final episodes of the Great Revolt against Rome. Instead of fighting against the Roman Empire in 73 CE, at the end of the First Jewish-Roman War, the Sicarii rebels chose to commit suicide. Fast forward two millennia and the place where they took their final stand is a beautiful mesa overlooking the northern basin of the Dead Sea; while up on Herod's Western Palace, views take the eye over an immense gorge and the expanse of the entire valley. A further hour's trek along Snake Path, an iconic hike in Israel, gives you the optimum view for the sunset over the landscape.

From breathtaking heights to the wonders on the ground, with more than 1,000 varieties of flora and another 1,000 species of cacti, Ein Gedi Botanical Garden is a fascinating area to explore. For starters, it is the only botanical garden in the world that people live in, but if you combine its residential element with the gentle hiking trails, endearing wildlife and the pièce de résistance, the park's stunning waterfall, the garden is full of amazing surprises. A petting zoo inside makes it a family-friendly destination. Meanwhile, the Ein Gedi Nature Reserve is where you can see one of the largest groups of Nubian ibexes in Israel, as well as hyraxes, foxes, wolves, bats, snakes, frogs, crabs, various birds and much more. Be sure to soak up the unique environment of Jordan's wonderful oases before you move on to your next destination.

The Dead Sea is a rare ecological find. With its ecosystem completely toxic to plants and animals, travellers have to flock further afield to experience the beautiful wildlife Jordan has to offer

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Sinkholes are common, so only travel to safe areas.

Best time to visit:

March to May (to avoid scorching temperatures)

Time zone:

UTC+2

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Useful sites:

www.touristisrael.com/dead-sea/289
www.deadsea.com
www.britannica.com/place/Dead-Sea

36

SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK

For some of the best wildlife viewing on the planet, look no further than Tanzania

Thundering across the plains of Serengeti in Tanzania in the east of Africa, some 1.5 million wildebeest make a 1,931-kilometre (1,200-mile) journey towards the green pastures of the Maasai Mara Game Reserve in neighbouring Kenya. It is the largest movement of animals in the world, and the wildebeest are not alone; they are joined by thousands upon thousands of zebra and Thomson's gazelle. As such, it's a truly amazing, jaw-dropping wildlife show and definitely one of life's natural wonders.

Serengeti National Park is an impressive wildlife sanctuary, established in 1951 and designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site 30 years later. An area of outstanding beauty, it has attracted controversy over the years – not least for the British-led decision to move most the Maasai people from the land – but the motivation was to preserve the wildlife and it thrives in abundance. Here you can see the densest lion population on Earth, and view African leopards, African bush elephants, eastern black rhinoceros and African buffalo.

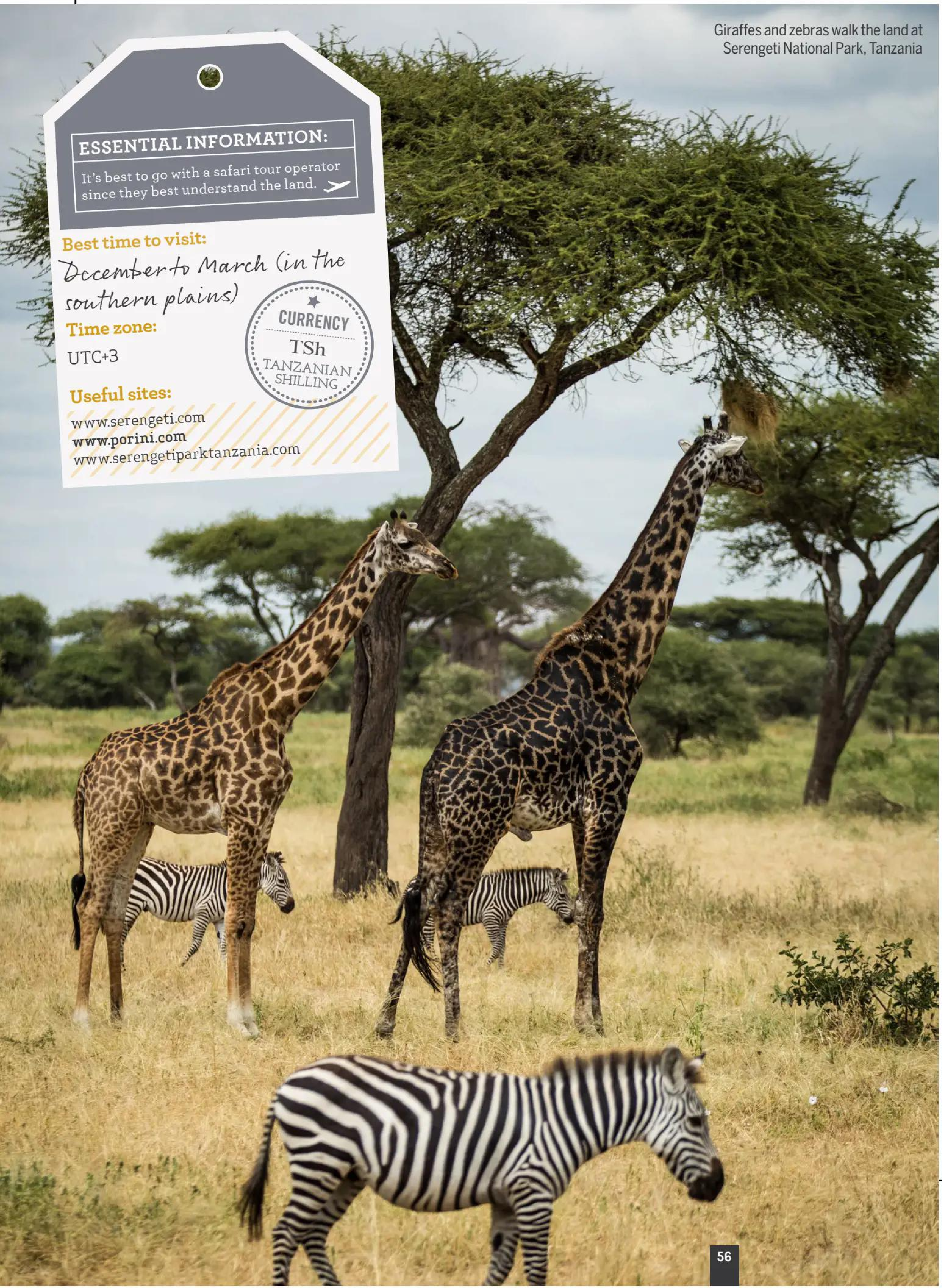
Indeed, the wealth of wildlife is overwhelming, with 4,000 spotted hyena, golden wolves, mongooses, otters, cheetahs, Masai giraffes, warthogs, hippos, species of antelope, more than 500 species of bird, reptiles from the Nile crocodile to the leopard tortoise to chameleons, black mambas and puff adders. That's only brushing the surface, too. A trip to Serengeti National Park is like a who's who of iconic animals, which conservationists work hard to protect and help thrive.

Going to the National Park is therefore of benefit financially for those seeking to prevent poaching, making it a most noble trip. It's split into three sections with the endless plains of the 'serengit' in the south and centre the most popular and where you'll view the majority of the amazing wildlife. You'd see less in the north, at the point where it merges with the Maasai Mara Reserve, but a trip to the western corridor is worth it for the forest and the animals around the Grumeti River. Everything you've dreamed an Africa safari to be is found here, and there's an abundance of trips you can take, from the traditional game drives during the day to the night tours, walking trips and ventures that can take you up high for views from a plane.

At 14,750 square kilometres (5,695 square miles), don't expect to cover the entire park. Pick your interest and you'll be able to hit the long, rough roads for the ride of your life. There are wonderful stops, including the Serengeti Visitor's Centre where you can refresh and catch a glimpse of passing wildlife, and some Maasai villages whose populations will be more than willing to teach you their culture and traditions. Maybe even engage in a dance as you learn of a different way of life.

One highlight is the Moru Kopjes, home to the black rhino and the Serengeti Rhino Project. The scenic rock formations in this area are themselves a phenomenal sight, tinted red due to the oxidation of the iron they contain and a point at which animals and plants thrive, safe from the harsh weather of the plains.

But while there is an opportunity to seek out the Olduvai Gorge, where the first early human species is understood to have resided and where the complexities of humanity can be seen, mainly in the stone tools that have been uncovered there, it's the wildebeest that will prove the largest draw. You'll never return disappointed.



Giraffes and zebras walk the land at Serengeti National Park, Tanzania

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

It's best to go with a safari tour operator since they best understand the land.

Best time to visit:
December to March (in the southern plains)

Time zone:
UTC+3

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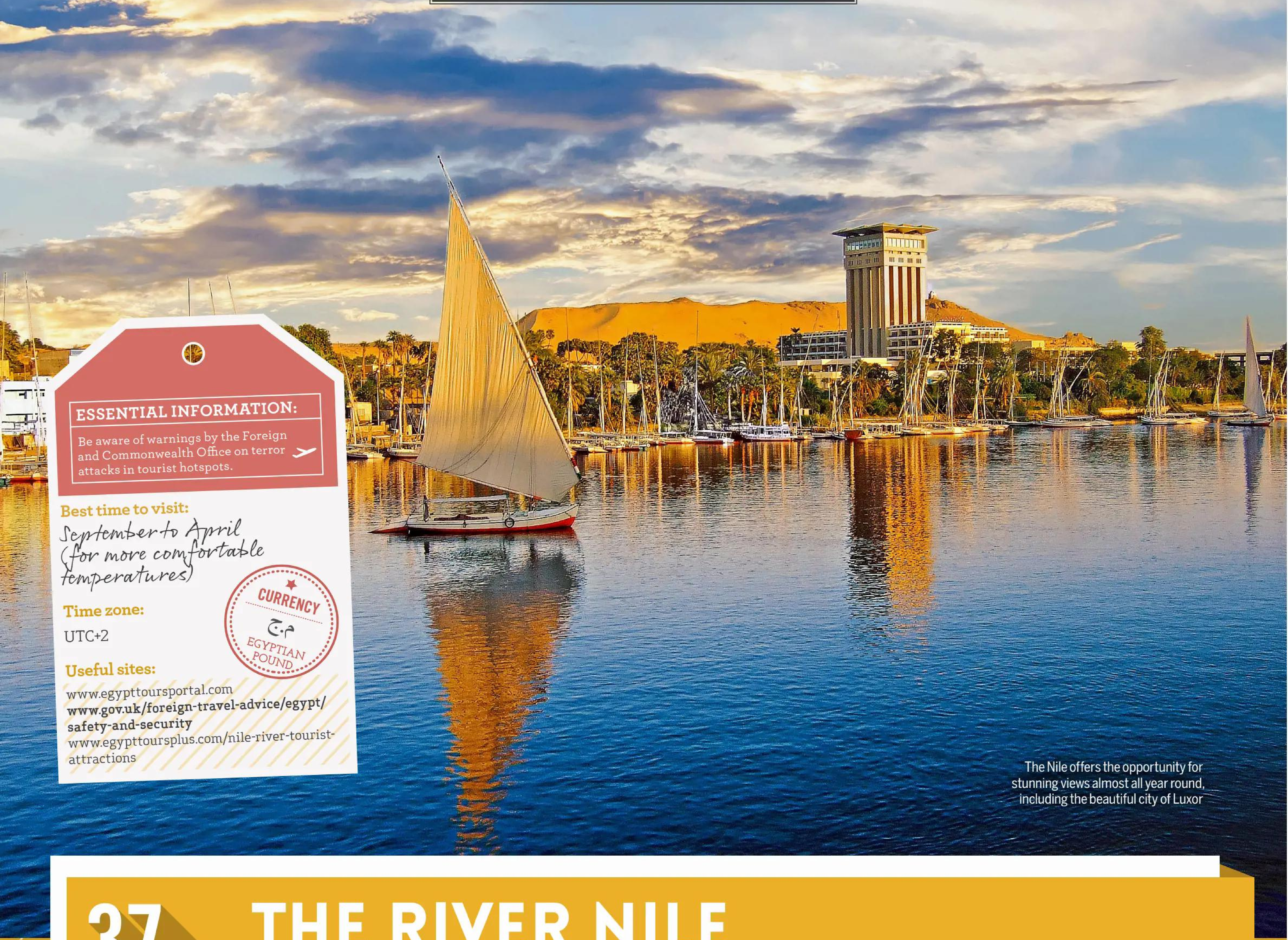
Useful sites:
www.serengeti.com
www.porini.com
www.serengetiparktanzania.com



The Nile offers the opportunity for stunning views almost all year round, including the beautiful city of Luxor

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Be aware of warnings by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on terror attacks in tourist hotspots.

Best time to visit:

September to April (for more comfortable temperatures)

Time zone:

UTC+2

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EGYPTIAN POUND

Useful sites:

www.egypttoursportal.com
www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/egypt/safety-and-security
www.egypttoursplus.com/nile-river-tourist-attractions

37

THE RIVER NILE

Travelling along the vast horizon of Egypt's river, adventure and culture awaits

Few experiences can compare to cruising down the longest river in the world. Such a title is often debated as belonging to the Amazon River, however *Guinness World Records* currently states that the title belongs to the River Nile, because the Amazon has several mouths that make it difficult to officially determine where it ends. With a total length of 6,695 kilometres (4,160 miles) stretching between Lake Victoria and the Mediterranean Sea, and collecting water from 11 different countries, the Nile is indisputably the longest river on the African continent. Although commonly associated with Egypt, only approximately a fifth of the river passes through this country. Regardless, there is plenty to see along Egypt's stretch of the Nile.

From high mountains to low, arid deserts and tropical rainforests, there are so many incredible sights you will see along the Nile. Visitors can expect to discover a vast array of ancient Egyptian ruins, as well as multiple cultural and historical landmarks. Popular sites include Egypt's capital city of Cairo, the largest city in the Middle East, as well as the extravagant tombs of the pharaohs of Egypt – the Pyramids of Giza, a tourist hotspot all year round and the only remaining Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Aside from the traditional attractions, many fascinating adventures await. The Ancient Egyptian city of Aswan is situated on the east bank of the Nile in south Egypt. A busy market town, it is home to the Philae Temple, which was constructed more than 2,600 years ago as homage to the Egyptian goddess Isis. Nearby, the Valley of the Kings in Luxor is an intriguing and complex labyrinth of underground tombs, each chamber decorated with ancient murals and hieroglyphs. Although it can get busy, it is still a fascinating and essential destination along the Nile's vast journey.

Nearby is the equally astounding Valley of the Queens, an ancient royal necropolis for the wives of the great pharaohs who were laid to rest between 1550 and 1070 BCE.

Outside of Egypt, the river has plenty of other fascinating stops to enjoy. There isn't anywhere along the River Nile that showcases a greater concentration of the beloved ancient pyramids than the royal city of Meroë in north Sudan, where more than 200 pyramids stand proudly decorating the Sahara.

A stretch of the Nile in Uganda is home to the beautiful Murchison Falls National Park. The park is the largest in the country and home to a plethora of exotic animals including lions, crocodile, hippos and giraffes. Visitors will also find an impressive 42-metre (138-foot) waterfall. A mere 30-minute climb to the top rewards visitors with a stunning peak over the top of the waterfall as it flows back into the Nile. The source of the Nile, the Ugandan city of Jinja, is great for leisure and sporting activities, from white water rafting to sailing.

However long you spend trekking the River Nile, adventure is endless, and the experiences last a lifetime.

38 PAMUKKALE

Forget the White Cliffs of Dover – traverse the pools of the White Cotton Castle of Turkey

There are more than 1,000 UNESCO World Heritage sites around the world, but only 38 qualify as both a natural and cultural wonder. And only one of them is a stunning cascade of white, limestone pools, flowing into an ancient town with both Greek and Roman influences. That site is Pamukkale and Hierapolis.

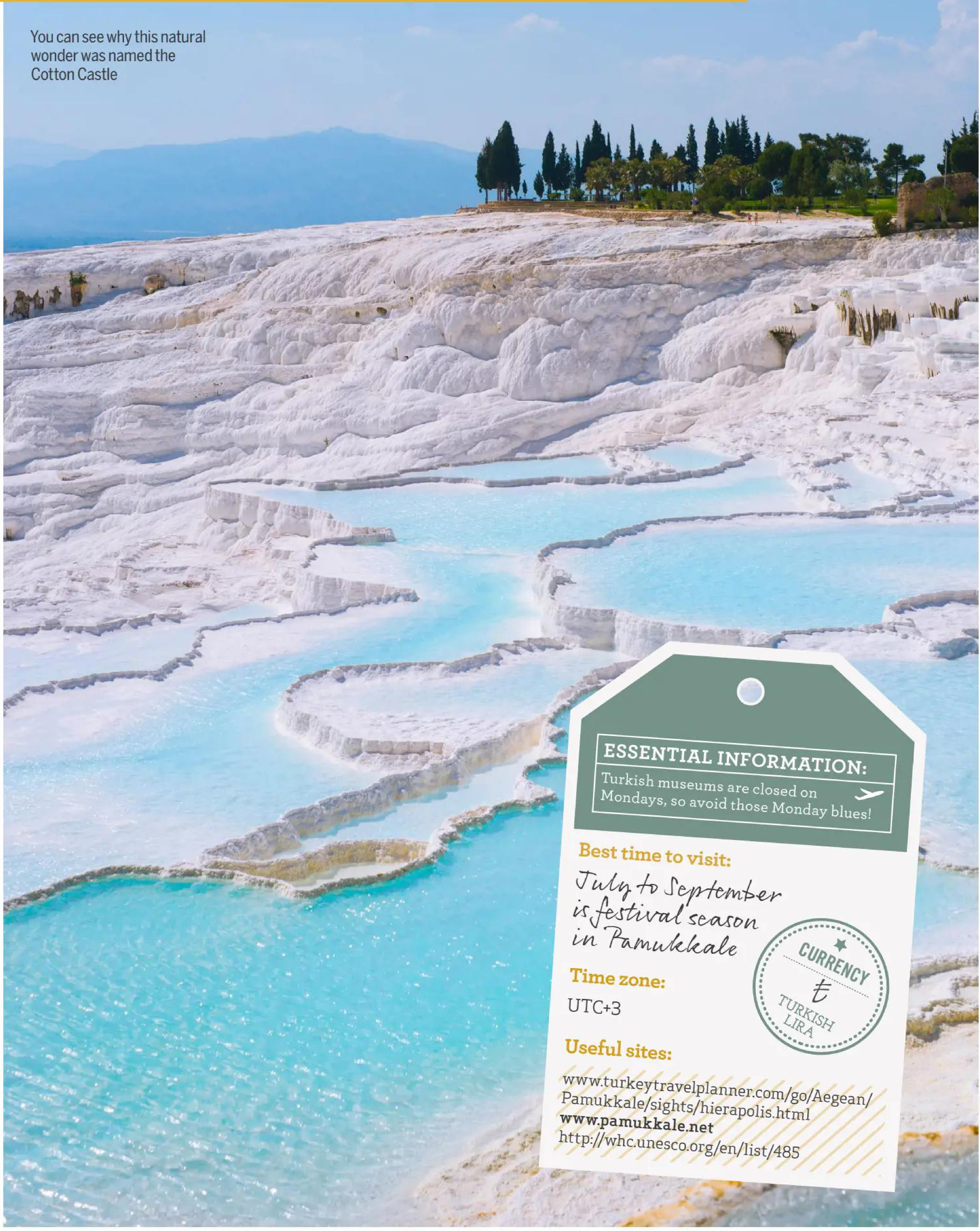
Situated in western Turkey, Pamukkale is one of the most incredible sights you'll ever lay your eyes on. For 14,000 years, natural hot springs have been pumping water loaded with calcium to the surface. As the water flowed down the valley or evaporated, calcium deposits were left, resulting in white 'steps' made of travertine, a type of limestone. These created a natural terracing down the valley. Given the name Pamukkale – 'Cotton Castle' in Turkish – by the locals, that is an extremely apt description for something that looks like it belongs in the pages of a fantasy novel.

There is simply nothing like Pamukkale anywhere in the world thanks to the unique combination of the hot springs, calcium in the ground and the valley providing the angle for the cascade to form. This natural wonder has drawn attention, partly for its sheer beauty, but also for the health benefits of bathing in mineral-rich waters. Around 2,000 years ago, the town of Hierapolis was formed at the top of Pamukkale, and the two have combined to create one of Turkey's most popular tourist destinations.

Pamukkale has to be high up on any traveller's list purely for the unique sight of those brilliant-white mini waterfalls, working their way down the valley – a sight that is truly awe-inspiring and exclusive to the area. However, there is also a rare opportunity to get up close and personal with a UNESCO World Heritage site. Many are roped off, only to be viewed from afar for safety. However, in Pamukkale you can stroll along the expanse of travertine, being asked only to give a small fee and to remove your shoes so as not to spoil the incredible structure that has been building ever since woolly mammoths strode the Earth. Not much to ask now, is it? Each step is covered with a shallow pool of warm, aquamarine water, so if anything the rules work in your favour as you are made to treat your feet to a natural foot spa.

If walking isn't your thing, you can get an amazing bird's-eye view of Pamukkale by paragliding over the site. Once you've worked up a sweat, taking in the wondrous surroundings of the Turkish landscape from the spectacular natural wonder, make your way to the top of the cascade where you can soak your tired limbs in the thermal pool that is the source of Pamukkale itself. The mineral-rich, 35-degrees-Celsius (95-degrees-Fahrenheit) water is great for easing aches and pains as well as more serious afflictions, such as rheumatism. This is no ordinary thermal pool, either. The pool, known as the Ancient Pool or Cleopatra's Pool, is shaded by cypress, oleander and palm trees, whisking you back a couple of thousand years and making that hot tub at your hotel pale in comparison.

The rest of Hierapolis is well worth a look, as well. The town was founded in the 2nd century BCE by the Attalid kings, a Greek dynasty. The town grew around the natural hot springs, becoming wealthy due to the number of visitors who came from afar to sample the famous restorative waters of Pamukkale – much the same as what goes on today, in fact! With the fall of Greece and the rise of the Roman Empire, the Greek spas turned into Roman baths and, following a major reconstruction due to an earthquake in 60 CE, the town took on a much



You can see why this natural wonder was named the Cotton Castle

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Turkish museums are closed on Mondays, so avoid those Monday blues!

Best time to visit:

July to September is festival season in Pamukkale

Time zone:

UTC+3

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Useful sites:

www.turkeytravelplanner.com/go/Aegean/Pamukkale/sights/hierapolis.html

www.pamukkale.net

http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/485

The town of Pamukkale, with one of the best views in the world

more Latin feel. Hierapolis means Holy City and under the Romans it became a religious hub. Today there are many church ruins dotted around the town that are well worth exploring. When the Romans converted to Christianity, the baths building was repurposed to become a huge church, which has in turn been transformed into an archaeological museum.

Apollo was Hierapolis's principle deity, and a temple dedicated to him was built, which is a must-see on your trip. However, being nearly two millennia old, it is unfortunately well past its prime, and is far from the spectacle it must once have been. In fact, some of the columns from the temple can be found in the Ancient Pool, so if you go for a swim, you'll literally be dipping into ancient history.

Behind the temple is another stunning sight – a Roman theatre. Built in the 2nd century CE, it may not be much to look at from the outside, but persevere and the sight down the dozens of rows of seats that was capable of holding 12,000 people is guaranteed to take your breath away. The size, the detail and the columns will instantly transport you back in time, and you can easily imagine the dramas and comedies that were performed here. Depending on how much you love ruins, Hierapolis can take anything from two hours to a whole day to explore – perfect for travellers with a loose plan who can afford to take as much or as little time as they want exploring one of the world's most staggeringly beautiful areas.

The contrast between the pristine, white terracing of Pamukkale as it gently fills up a steaming pool of water and the rugged, raw, ancient town of Hierapolis, steeped in history and wonder, is simply incredible. Two worlds collide thanks to the benevolence of our planet's geology, so for the ultimate mix of relaxation, wondrous sights, fascinating history and a truly unique experience, Pamukkale and Hierapolis has to be high up on anyone's travel bucket list.

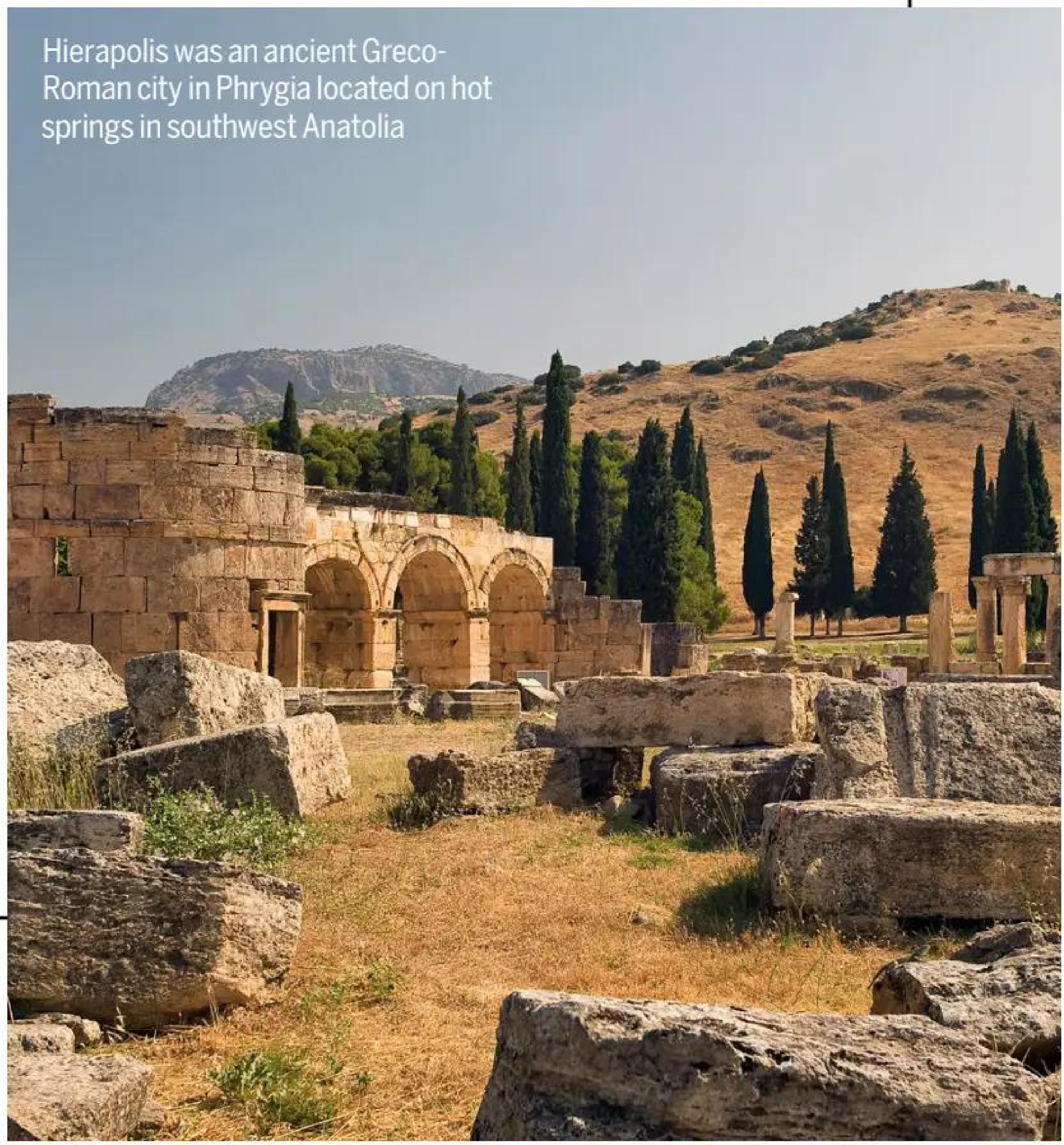
Haunted Hierapolis

A more ghoulish attraction at Hierapolis is the Necropolis and the Ploutonion at Hierapolis. Hierapolis has one of Anatolia's largest cemeteries, with burial sites ranging from simple peasant constructions to elaborate tombs. High up the hill is the tomb of Philip the Apostle, worth a look if you have the energy.

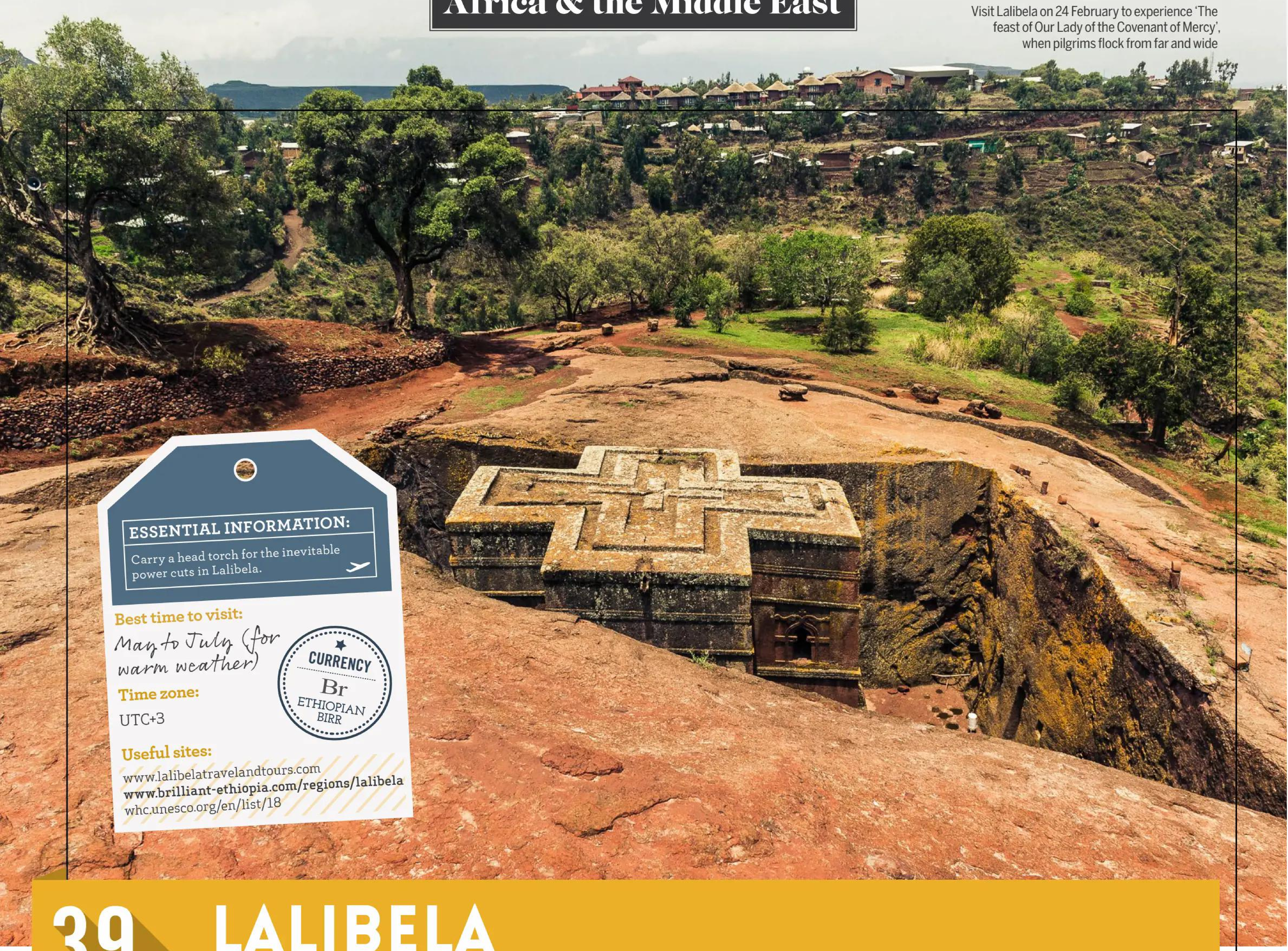
One more thing to look at but keep clear of is Pluto's Gate. In Roman times it was thought that this cave was a gate to the underworld and Pluto, with creatures dying if they went near it. Party-pooper scientists have now discovered it is simply noxious carbon dioxide that is being belched out of the ground, but the sight of this temple shrouded in darkness is still enough to make you wonder if there really is something down there to avoid.

> The columns will instantly transport you back in time

Imagine the plays that captivated audiences in this incredible theatre as you eat your packed lunch



Hierapolis was an ancient Greco-Roman city in Phrygia located on hot springs in southwest Anatolia



Visit Lalibela on 24 February to experience 'The feast of Our Lady of the Covenant of Mercy', when pilgrims flock from far and wide

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
Carry a head torch for the inevitable power cuts in Lalibela.

Best time to visit:
May to July (for warm weather)

Time zone:
UTC+3

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Useful sites:
www.lalibelatravelandtours.com
www.brilliant-ethiopia.com/regions/lalibela
whc.unesco.org/en/list/18

39

LALIBELA

An amazing burrowed religious site that stands proud below Ethiopia's holy town

To understand the significance of Ethiopia's Lalibela, you must first understand its history. In the 12th century, King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela set out to construct what he dubbed a 'new Jerusalem'. The decision came about after the Muslim conquests had halted Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Approximately 645 kilometres (400 miles) from Addis Ababa, 11 medieval monolithic churches were hewn from the living rock of monolithic block doors, windows, columns and floors. Roofs were also chiselled out, forming this gigantic project, which was further completed with an extensive labyrinth of drainage ditches, trenches and ceremonial passages, including some that had openings to hermit caves and catacombs.

The churches were separated into two main groups: five of them were built on the north side of the river Jordan, while another six were constructed on the south side. The 11th church – Bete Giyorgis, or the Church of Saint George – is isolated from the others, but connected via a system of hand-carved trenches. Today, the site is jointly managed by state and Church, and even now it is home to a large community of priests and monks. Holy days of the Ethiopian Christian calendar attract thousands of pilgrims throughout the year.

Believed to predate Lalibela's 'new Jerusalem' by approximately 80 years, Yemrehanna Kristos, with its alternating wood and stone layers, is one of Ethiopia's best-preserved late-Aksumite buildings. Unlike Lalibela's holy maze, it was built, not burrowed, and most likely served as a blueprint for his structurally sound and beautifully detailed system. The whole building 'floats' on a foundation of olive wood panels, which keep it off the sodden ground.

If Lalibela is the crown of Ethiopian Christianity, the Bete Giyorgis is the central diamond of the district's religion, and a must-see on your visit. The building, which sits separate from the others, is a 15-metre-high (49-foot-high), three-tiered plinth in the shape of a Greek cross. It has been exceptionally preserved, and visitors can still admire the structural beauty of the building as though they had been born in the days of King Lalibela. The church's treasures are held in two 800-year-old, olive-wood boxes that are believed to have been carved by King Lalibela himself, and they're not the only places you'll find interesting artefacts. Cavities in the walls surrounding the church are home to mummified corpses, along with a 16th-century canvas of Saint George slaying his dragon.

Sitting in a large courtyard containing three churches is the demure Bet Maryam. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the building is small but beautifully designed and decorated. This church boasts the reputation of being the most popular among pilgrims, and some believe that it might have been the first built in Lalibela. If size matters to you, then try Biete Medhane Alem, which is more like a vast Greek temple than a traditional Ethiopian church.

There are many wondrous sights to be found in Lalibela, but for an authentic experience, visit on one of the many holy days to see the celebrations of Ethiopia's rich religious history.

40

BURJ KHALIFA

Enjoy the views from the world's tallest building in Dubai

For decades, the title of the world's tallest building was fiercely disputed. Was it the World Trade Center, the world's highest architectural point, or was it Sears Tower, the world's highest occupied floor? What even defines a building? Then in 2010, one building decided enough was enough and simply crushed all possible opposition in its wake by becoming the world's tallest everything and grabbing all the records. Tallest building, highest occupied floor, most nervous window cleaners – the lot. That building was Burj Khalifa in Dubai, home to apartments, offices, a hotel, swimming pools, a restaurant and nine world records.

First of all, let's get past the elephant in the room: the numbers. Actually, it's more like 10,000 elephants in the room. That's how much the concrete alone weighs. Burj Khalifa stands a staggering 828-metres (2,716-feet) tall – more than 60 per cent higher than the previous world's tallest building, Taipei 101. For comparison, Taipei 101 is 61 per cent higher than the Chrysler Building – the tallest building in 1930. Burj Khalifa is so tall, its unique spiralling Y-shape was developed to help the tower reduce the impact of the wind raging nearly a kilometre into the sky.

The first eight floors belong to the Armani Hotel; the next eight to the Armani residences – luxury flats designed by Giorgio himself. Some 80 floors are given over to 900 further luxury apartments, while 37 floors are reserved for office space. But it's not all business: tourists are catered for as well. The lift can take you from the ground floor to the observation deck on Floor 124 in just 60 seconds, where you can take an interactive tour around the construction of Dubai and Burj Khalifa itself. That costs around £30/$40, but if you want to visit Floor 148, the world's highest observation deck that sits 555 metres (1,820 feet) above Dubai, you'll need to fork out around £75/$98.

In a further example of Burj Khalifa's incredible height, even though Floor 148 sits 273 metres (896 feet) below the top of the tower, it would still clock in as the world's fifth tallest building by itself. For the traditionalists, laid horizontally Floor 148 would be the length of 66 London buses away from the base. Level 122 hosts At.Mosphere, the world's highest restaurant. Afternoon tea with sparkling wine costs from £100/$130 if you want a window seat, but if you've gone all the way to the 122nd floor you'd be crazy not to drink in the view and cover your eyes when the bill arrives. For dinner, the taster menu will set you back £200/$260, while a three-course meal is around £140/$180. If this is stretching the budget too far, grab a sandwich from the mall at the base of the tower and take a dip in one of five swimming pools. And yes, one is the world's highest.

Burj Khalifa is opulent, awe-inspiring, obscene, breathtaking and an absolute must-visit destination.

Burj Khalifa's epic height forced designers to develop ways to disrupt the wind to avoid a catastrophic *Wizard of Oz*-style incident

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Book an early evening slot to enjoy day, sunset and night views of Dubai.

Best time to visit:

November to December (to avoid crowds)

Time zone:

UTC+4

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Useful sites:

tickets.atthetop.ae/atthetop/en-us
burjkhalifa.ae/en/index.aspx
www.visitdubai.com/en/pois/burj-khalifa

41

TSINGY DE BEMARAHA

Madagascar's stone cathedrals are a marvel of nature and a metropolis of magnificent creatures

Madagascar is an extraordinary place. The fourth largest island in the world, it is home to numerous endemic species, such as the lemur and the fossa, not to mention the hundreds of native birds, frogs, lizards, reptiles and insects. Its biodiversity has earned the island the nickname 'the eighth continent'. However, even by Madagascan standards, Tsingy de Bemaraha National Park is an oddity.

Of the country's diverse landscapes, this is the most unusual; a forest of stone, characterised by limestone 'cathedrals', beneath which some truly remarkable animals thrive. The karsts are dubbed 'tsingy', which roughly translates to 'a place where one cannot walk barefoot', or 'walking on tiptoes'. Formed from shells and corals 200 million years ago, the limestone formations rose from the seabed, before being eroded by rainwater five million years ago – resulting in a vast terrain of pointed, jagged and sharp stone towers, interspersed with trees, rising from the bed hidden at their feet.

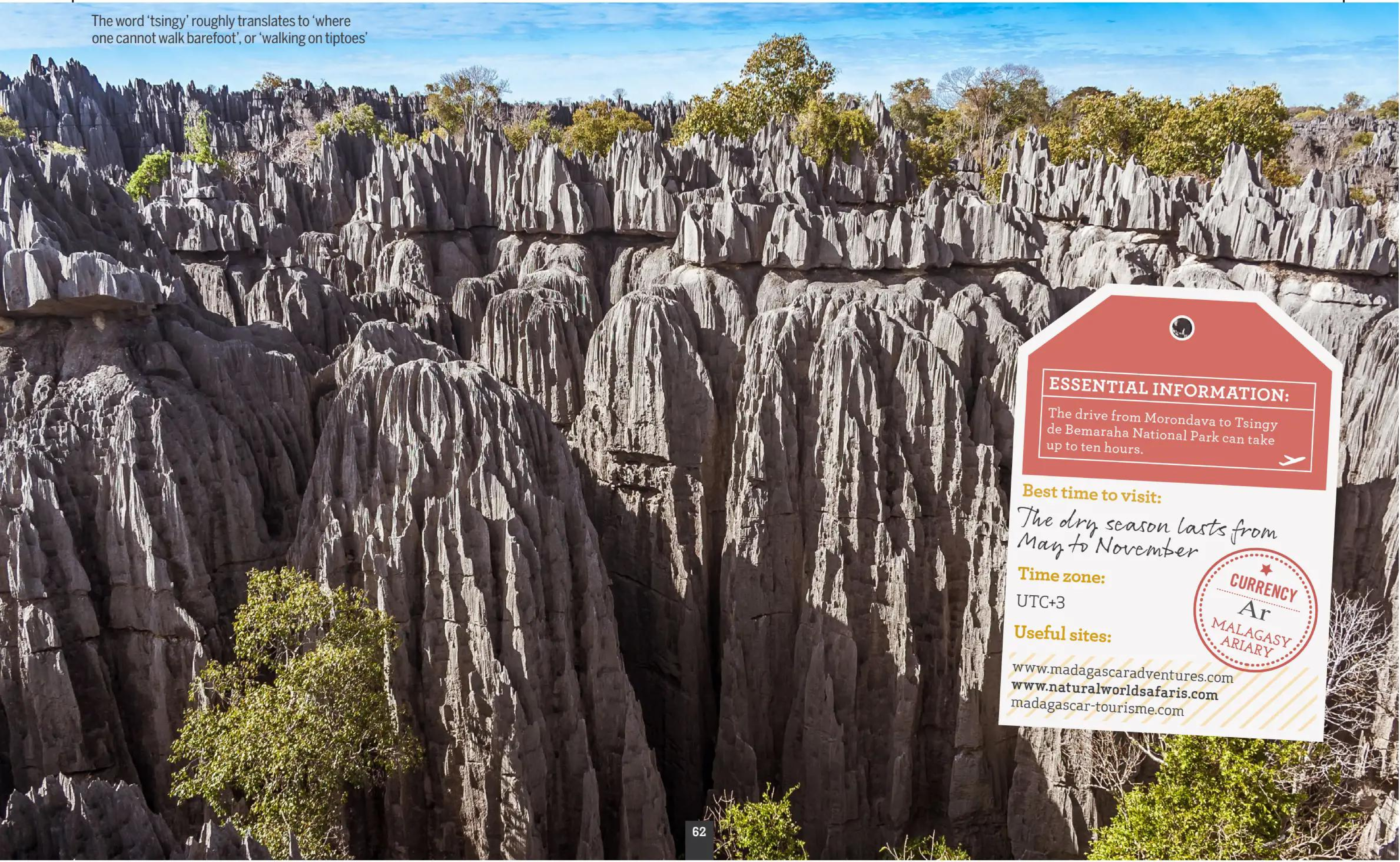
The UNESCO World Heritage site is so impenetrable that most of it could not be accessed until the 1990s, when the Antsika Association was established to help the country protect and monetise the natural wonder. They worked with Malagasy to install a via ferrata network of steel cables, pegs and ladders, and trained locals to safely guide visitors around.

Located in the country's west, the park spans nearly 100 kilometres (62 miles) in length and is just over 40 kilometres (25 miles) wide. With only 10 per cent of Madagascar's forests remaining, Tsingy de Bemaraha provides a safe haven to its endemic species. The Manambolo River gorge, home to ancient cemeteries, runs by the south of the park, and thanks to an abundance of underground rivers and springs, this unwieldy landscape is capable of sustaining a spectacular array of life. The fossil-encrusted park hosts more than ten species of lemur, 50 reptiles, 90 birds and hundreds of plants.

The journey to the park is a long and bumpy ride on dirt roads. Visitors are ferried across the crocodile-infested Tsiribihina and Manambolo rivers, before driving through the Avenue of the Baobabs, Madasgar's most famous tree. True explorers may opt to canoe over the mangrove-lined Tsiribihina River.

The hike itself begins in the archetypal dry deciduous forest, home to lemurs and chameleons. In fact, this is the only known place in the world where the Antsingy leaf chameleon lives, and the only dry forest the Madagascan wood rail bird calls home. Deeper in, the terrain grows rockier and rockier until, soon enough, an enormous wall of stone emerges. From here, adventurers tread between the gaps and crawl horizontally through caves. Beneath the ground, you can even submerge in the subterranean world of calcareous caves, with thick tree roots driven deep, in search of the hidden waters that flow here. Above, those seeking to conquer the seemingly unconquerable do their best to mimic the lemur; climbing up ladders, footholes and pegs, towards the skylight.

Hours of scrambling later, at the top the pinnacles form a fortress of stone, 140 metres (459 feet) high – complete with rope bridge. The rocks stretch to the horizon, like alien temples; trees sway against the stoic formations, while lemurs hop from steeple to steeple, navigating from one forest to another. This is Madagascar at its purest; unexpectedly magnificent.



The word 'tsingy' roughly translates to 'where one cannot walk barefoot', or 'walking on tiptoes'

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

The drive from Morondava to Tsingy de Bemaraha National Park can take up to ten hours.

Best time to visit:

The dry season lasts from May to November

Time zone:

UTC+3

Useful sites:

www.madagascaradventures.com
www.naturalworldsafaris.com
madagascar-tourisme.com

CURRENCY
Ar
MALAGASY ARIARY

With crystal-clear water and an incredibly diverse ecosystem, the peaceful Lake Malawi is an aqua-adventurer's paradise

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Take malaria tablets with you and check which vaccinations you'll need.

Best time to visit:

Weather is mildest during the dry season, from May to October

CURRENCY

MK/MT

MALAWIAN KWACHA/ MOZAMBICAN METICAL

Time zone:

UTC+2

Useful sites:

www.malawitourism.com

www.nkwichi.com

www.signatureafricansafaris.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-visiting-lake-malawi

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LAKE MALAWI

Clear waters, diverse wildlife and beautiful scenery make this an idyllic location

Gazing out over the open, turquoise expanse of Lake Malawi, you could easily be forgiven for mistaking it for the sea. At 587 kilometres (365 miles) long and 83 kilometres (52 miles) wide, it is colossal – more than three times larger than the vast Lake Titicaca in South America. In the north, it reaches depths of 700 metres. Beneath the sparkling waters, hundreds of endemic species of fish jostle to and fro, while on the surface, rich islands teem with life.

Straddling the borders of Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania, the lake's combination of overflowing greenery, mountains and calm waters make this a veritable paradise. Idyllic fishing villages are scattered along the shoreline, amidst untouched stretches of sandy beach.

From Mangochi to Monkey Bay, and Nkhotakota to the historic sugar town of Dwangwa, the lake boasts a vast array of lodges, hotels and resorts. With the region home to baboons, leopards, warthogs and hundreds of species of bird, it makes for some exciting river safaris, in Liwonde National Park or the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve – as long as caution is paid to the hippos and Nile crocodiles.

Occupying tamer ground, tucked away on the Mozambique side of the lake is Nkwichi Lodge, named after the squeaks of feet along the wet beach. Part of the Manda Wilderness Project, dedicated to developing eco-tourism in Mozambique, it aims to minimise its environmental impact, while training and hiring local staff.

More akin to a tropical desert island, the coast makes for spectacular coastal walks among the monkeys and foliage, towards stunning viewpoints. Most lodges provide all manner of recreation; from quad biking, birdwatching and volleyball to jet skiing, sailing, windsurfing and water-skiing out on the open water.

However, it is underwater where the lake shows its true colours. Aside from occasional gusts of wind, Lake Malawi is mostly calm and crystal-clear, with visibility up to 30 metres (98 feet). The plethora of bright and bizarre creatures makes for prime scuba diving or snorkelling. There are more than 1,000 species of fish in these waters – more than North America and Europe combined. For the uninitiated, Malawi is one of the cheapest places in the world to become PADI-certified.

Likoma Island, on the eastern side of the lake, has been particularly well-preserved, with an abundant population of bloated, quirky baobab trees. Home to St Peter's Cathedral, the third-largest in Africa, the island can be reached either by a remarkable flight from Lilongwe or the MV Ilala – a 620-tonne ship that has sailed the entire length of the lake for almost 70 years. Kaya Mawa, nestled atop the coastal rocks, is a favourite escape, ripe for exploring.

Fed by 14 rivers, the lake is also home to a gathering unlike any other. It begins with an explosion in the horizon; smoke bursting from the lake. However, this is no fire, but the mass mating of the nkungo lake fly – the largest congregation of any species in the world, and a rowdy one at that. Unfortunate specimens, blown off course, may find themselves ending up in one of the local delicacies: fly burgers.

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PETRA

From temples carved out of the cliff face to immense structures, Jordan's Petra is a step back in time

Of all of the ancient cities in the world, few surprise and enthral in quite the same way as Petra, situated on the slopes of the mountain Jebel al-Madhbah between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea in the Arab state of Jordan. It's a magical city of rose-coloured rock, with splendid gasp-inducing sights at every turn. But unlike many other monuments on a sightseeing wishlist, Petra amazes not only on the surface, but with the manner of its formation. There really is nowhere else like it on Earth.

Petra was first inhabited some 11,000 years ago, but its development proper began when a tribe of Arabian nomads called the Nabataeans settled there from the 5th century BCE. As they became rich off the trade routes that crossed their land – dealing in frankincense and myrrh from Yemen, Chinese silks, Indian spices and cotton – they created a majestic cosmopolitan city that was hallmarked by its beautiful buildings and gardens.

But while many have built impressive monuments over the centuries, none have done so quite like the Nabataeans. Take a journey down through the wide valley known as Bab as-Siq, and keep going through the winding, narrow, dim gorge that is the Siq – the main entrance to the city that runs for just under 1.5 kilometres (one mile) – and you will end up at Al-Khazeneh, also known as the Treasury. What you'll see will astound you, for the structure was elaborately carved into the sandstone in the 1st century BCE. It was quite obviously designed to impress, and that it does in spades. Its facade measures 39 by 30 metres (128 by 98 feet), decorated with incredible carvings that highlight Nabataean culture. There's a giant urn, and a central figure said to be a combination of the Egyptian and Greek goddesses Isis and Tyche respectively, flanked by Amazons. With two large eagles, two lions and six columns that end in floral capitals beneath the main pediment, it'll induce a sweat perhaps only matched by those who carved it.

Yet what is perhaps most surprising is that the Treasury is primarily for show: enter and you'll encounter a relatively small hall, since its purpose was actually as a royal tomb for the Nabataean king Aretas IV. Only when Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt rediscovered the ruins of Petra more than a millennium after it had been deserted following a devastating earthquake in 749 did it become known as the Treasury. That was in 1812 and the structure was believed to hold riches.

But just as the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was entirely incorrect to suggest the site was the resting place of the Holy Grail (its facade was made famous in the film), so too was the 19th-century hunch so very wrong. Indeed, the urn was peppered with gunshots when the nomadic Bedouins opened fire in the hope that treasure would eventually spill out. In fact, it is made from solid sandstone and yet the legend is every bit as exciting as any visit to Petra will undoubtedly be.

More carved tombs are found along the southern cliff face on what is known as the Street of Facades, proving that there is far more to Petra than its most famous sight. There are more than 40 of these tombs spread over a number of tiers in a wide area just past the Treasury in the Outer Siq. Understood to have housed the bodies of important city officials, they are mixed with caves that may well have been used as temporary accommodation for those who were grieving or paying their respects.

A little further away is the open-air theatre, a Romanesque structure that was actually

You'll need to trek up 800 steps to reach the Monastery, but the effort is well worth it

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

You'll need a single-entry visa to enter the country, valid for a month.

Best time to visit:

March to May, and September to November

CURRENCY

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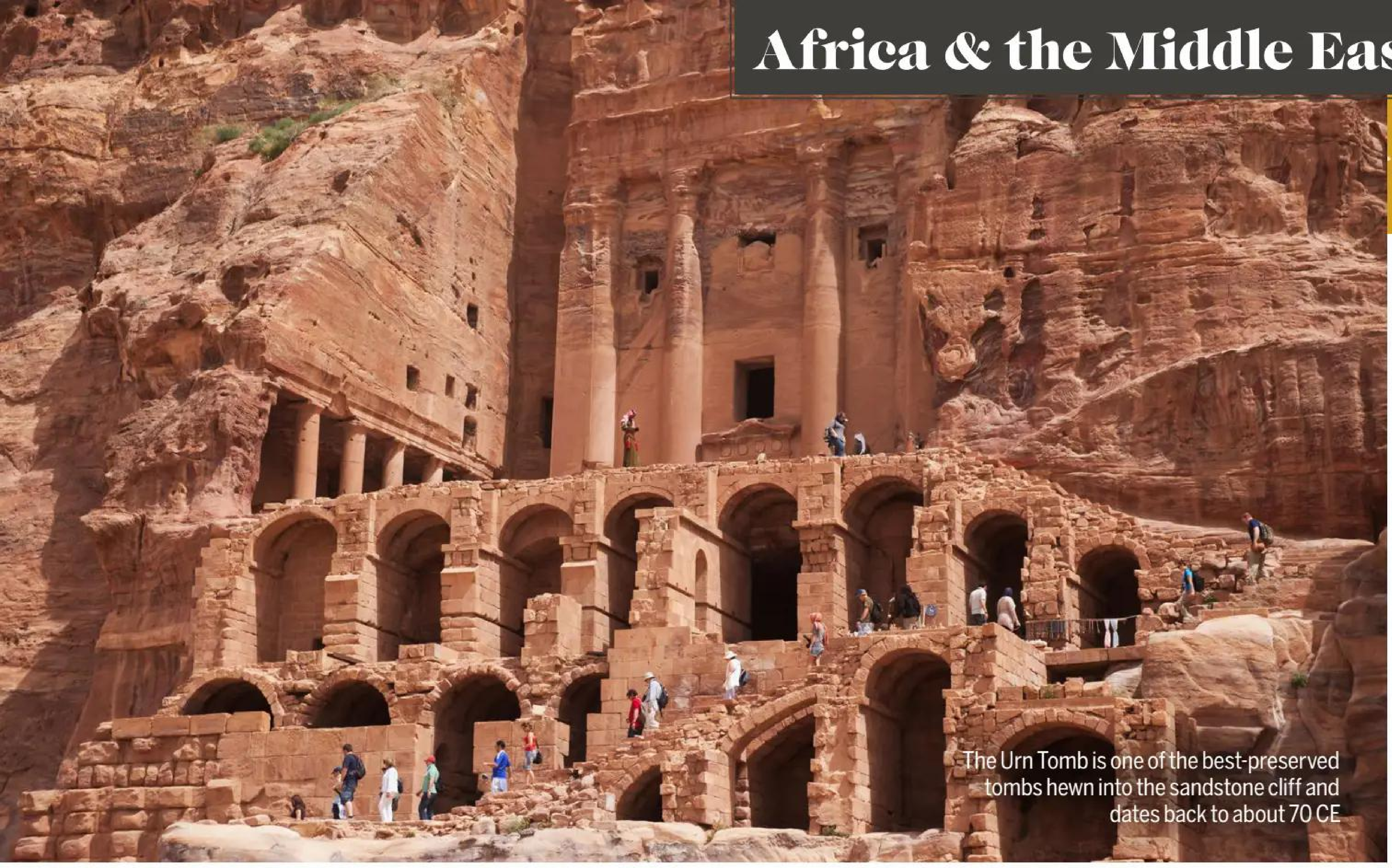
JORDANIAN DINAR

Time zone:

UTC+2

Useful sites:

www.visitpetra.jo
www.google.com/maps/about/behind-the-scenes/streetview/treks/petra/
http://international.visitjordan.com/Wheretogo/Petra.aspx

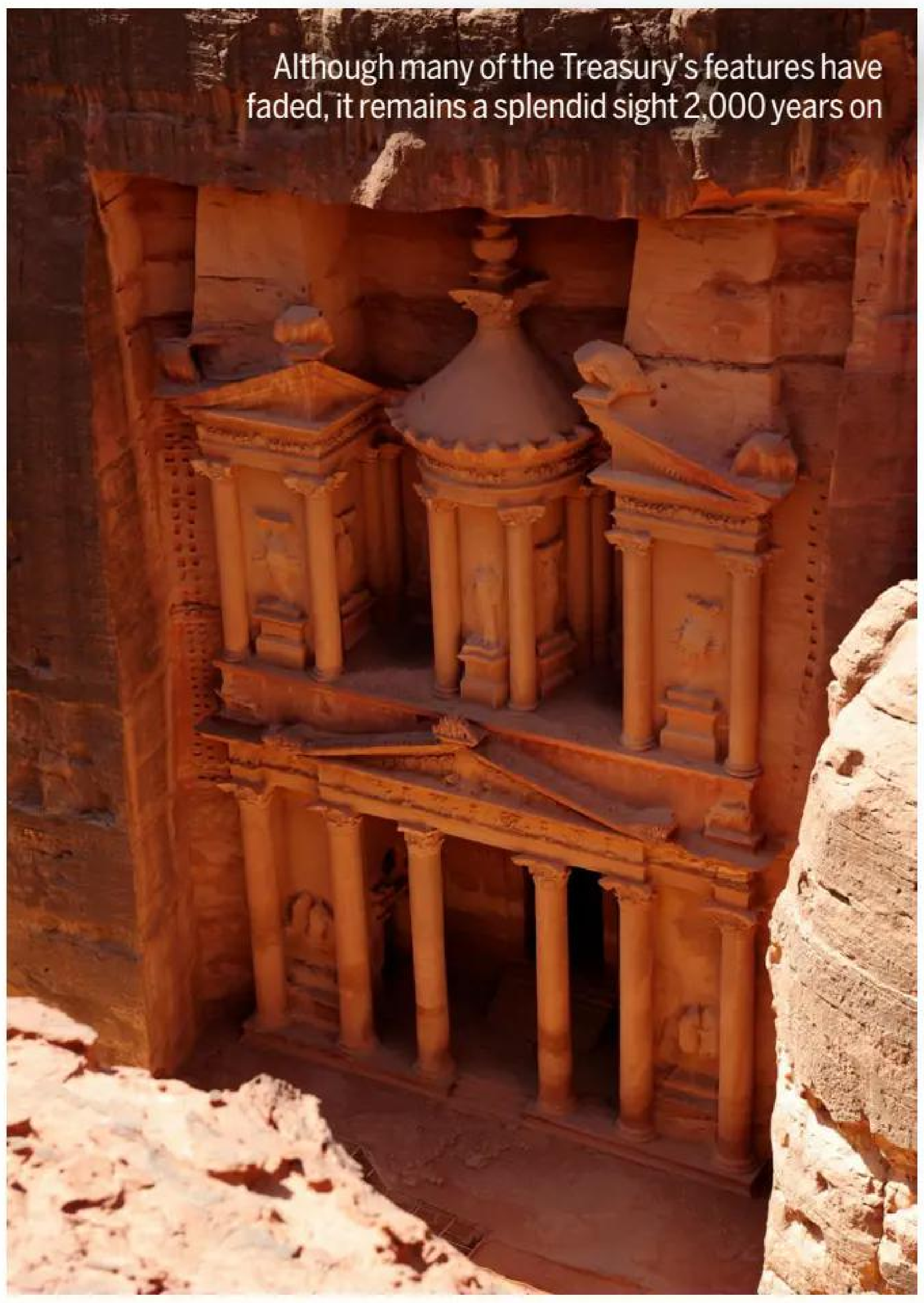


The Urn Tomb is one of the best-preserved tombs hewn into the sandstone cliff and dates back to about 70 CE

The legend is every bit as exciting as any visit to Petra

constructed by the Nabataeans before the Romans ever arrived in the city. While now badly deteriorated, it is mostly carved from solid rock, and it can hold a crowd of some 8,500 people, who would sit facing north and east in order to shield their eyes from the glare of the sun. The theatre would have played an important role in Nabataean life, and you can imagine it as an area bustling with life.

And yet death was never too far away, it seems: there are more Nabataean tombs dotted around, including the immense Palace Tomb with its huge facade, four burial chambers and five stories, as well as the Urn Tomb, which was likely built in 70 CE. The latter was adapted into a Byzantine church in 446 CE, centuries after the Romans – who adopted Christianity in 324 CE – took power in 106 CE. There really is a sense of evolving history in Petra.



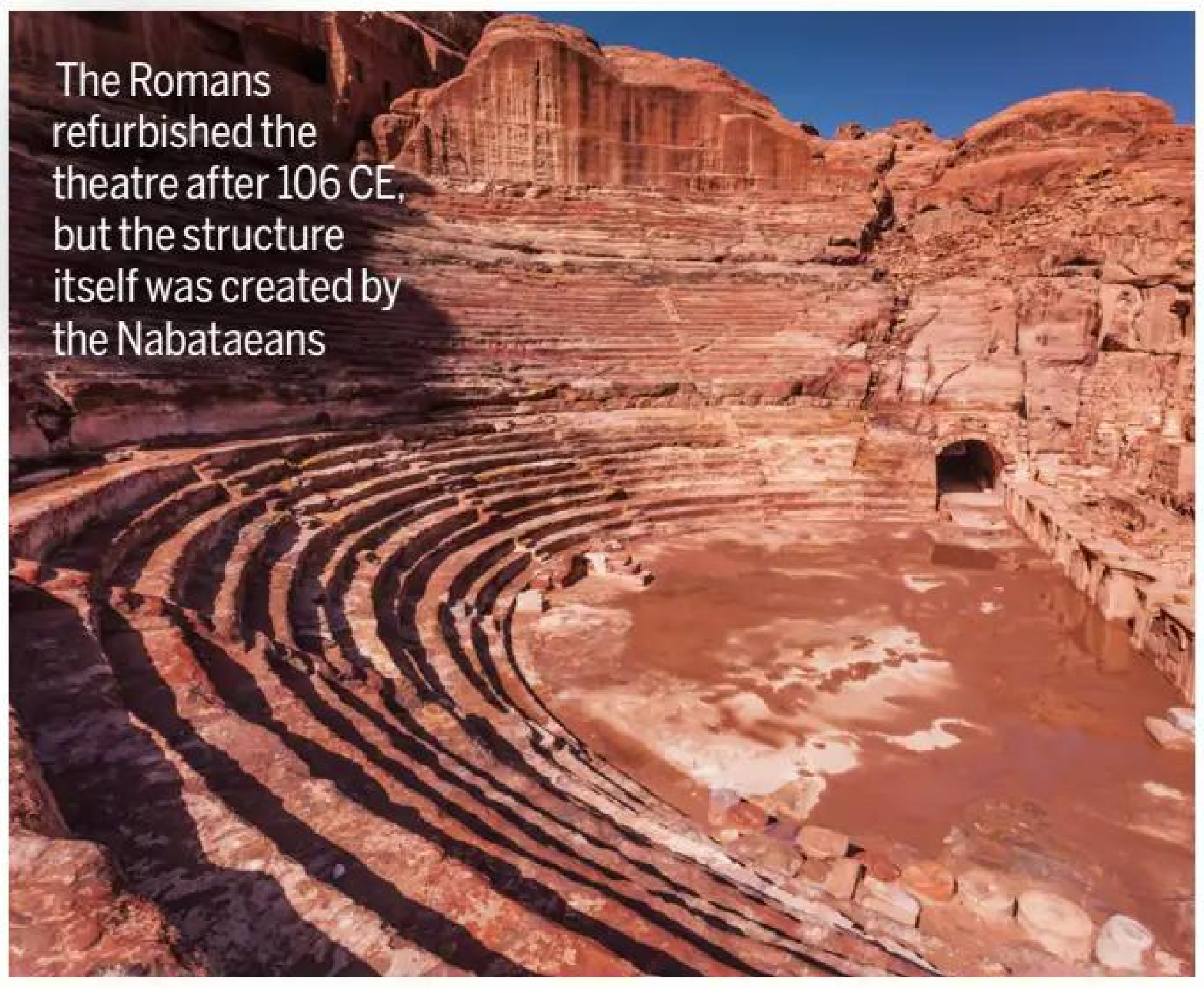
Although many of the Treasury's features have faded, it remains a splendid sight 2,000 years on

It's such a shame that so much has been damaged. A wander down the Colonnaded Street, for instance, is one of strict imagination since this principal shopping avenue – six metres (20 feet) wide – would once have been a hive of activity, particularly so at the market. The nearby Great Temple, too, now a major archaeological site, would have been a splendid sight when it was constructed, although much is left to inspire a sense of wonder. It is likely to have been a seat of government, and was adorned with beautiful art in keeping with the Nabataeans' love of sculpture and frescoes, seen in the use of elephant heads and well-carved pilasters.

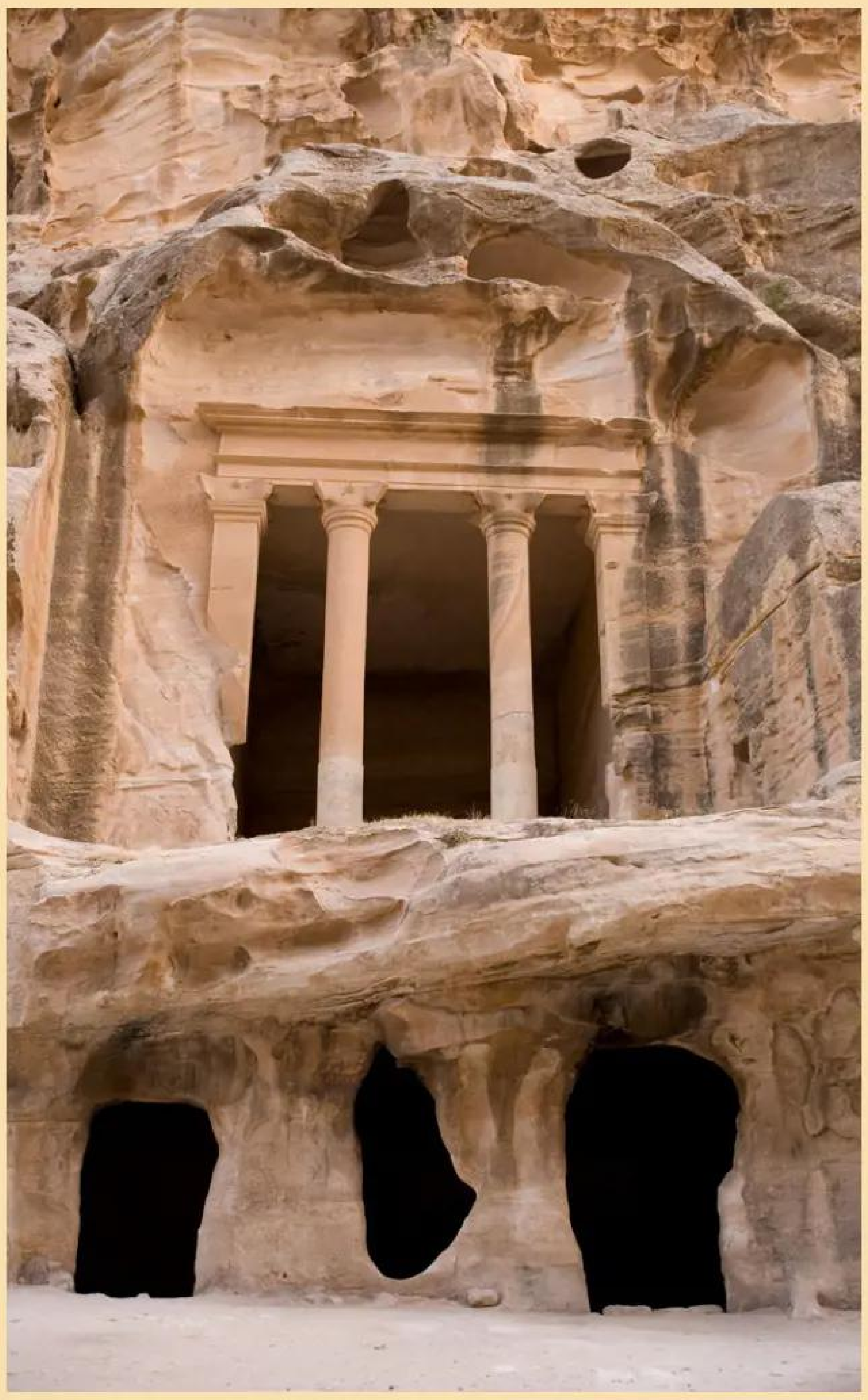
Even further along is the Qasr Al-Bint temple, constructed in 30 BCE by the Nabataeans. Unusually for Petra, it is free-standing and reaches a height of 23 metres (75 feet) with marble staircases and ornate statues. It is one of Petra's best-preserved structures, a fascinating complex that continues to unearth gems thanks to ongoing excavations and restoration.

A trip to Petra is incomplete without a visit to Ad Deir, however. Known as the Monastery, it is 50 metres (164 feet) wide and 45 metres (148 feet) tall with a doorway opening to a majestic height of eight metres (26 feet). It is carved from the rock and served as a tomb of a Nabataean god-king. It is arguably more impressive than the Treasury, which is quite some feat, but testament to the delights of his ancient caravan-city of Eastern traditions and Hellenistic architecture.

Just learning of the intricacies will astound: in 2016, the forgotten gardens of Petra were found once again, and showed a complex irrigation and water-storage system that not only allowed the gardens to flourish in the desert, but also fed fountains, a pond and a swimming pool up to 44 metres (144 feet) in length. Far from being a dry land, it even appears there were trees. Petra really is a city of discovery.



The Romans refurbished the theatre after 106 CE, but the structure itself was created by the Nabataeans



Little Petra

Travel away from Petra itself and you will come across Little Petra, or Siq al-Barid. It's a smaller and much quieter site but, like Petra itself, it has buildings carved into the sandstone and a wonderful sense of history.

The most likely explanation for its existence is that it was a place of rest for the caravans that headed to Petra from around the Middle East and the Mediterranean. As such, it had tombs, water channels and accommodation, and it is a chance to glimpse the real Jordan, some three miles off the more-beaten track.

In 2010, ancient Hellenistic-style wall paintings, once covered with centuries of grime, were finally revealed in Little Petra. Discovered in a dining area, principal chamber and recess, they show flowers, insects, people and birds, adding to the huge number of astounding tourist attractions in the area. Should you visit Petra, you must add them to your itinerary.

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If you're looking for a comfy bed at the end of a long trek in the Himalayas, the Modi Khola valley at Machapuchare Base Camp is a popular choice

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Dangerous weather conditions can have an effect on your route.

Best time to visit:

April and October (to avoid monsoon season)

Time zone:

Various

CURRENCY VARIES

Useful sites:

www.himalayantourism.com
www.travel-himalayas.com
www.wildernesstravel.com/trips/himalayas

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THE HIMALAYAS

A region made up of shards of culture and wonder from multiple countries

Crossing the mountainous range of the Himalayas, you would be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed by its vastness. How are you supposed to navigate an area that is ten times the size of France, which crosses several country borders, and links multiple ecosystems, religions and political stances? The Himalayas' 2,500-kilometre (1,553-mile) arc through India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan and China will take you on a journey across the highest mountains, the deepest gorges, and amazing trails of wild forest, crossing the plateau of Tibet and into Bhutan and the Indian state of Assam in the eastern Himalayas. The entire area is bursting with impressive biodiversity that is unrivalled by anywhere else in the world. Quite unlike many places you will visit on Earth, the Himalayas are a place where hostility melts into beauty: diverse cultures of people, who have adapted to some of the harshest weather conditions known to humankind, have made the Himalayas their home (approximately 40 million residents), and the area surrounding it a welcoming stop-gap for tourists.

Political strain has changed the course of the Himalayas for trekkers in recent decades. Unrest in Tibet has brought with it visa restrictions that can make travelling more difficult (but not impossible). Conversely, mountains along the northern border of Myanmar (Burma) that were once inaccessible have become accessible to the public. Ultimately, its peaks symbolise the harmonisation of three different religions that reside in its imposing shadow: Islam to the west, Hinduism to the south and Tibetan Buddhism to the north.

Some consider the idea of trekking the Himalayas completely out of their physical abilities, focusing purely on the challenge of Mount Everest. While scaling the mountain is the ultimate challenge for mountaineering experts and those who can thrive along the difficult and rugged terrain to the top, the Himalayas have honed in on the tourism trade too, making room for visitors with both luxurious and more modest lodges that allow the weary traveller to put their feet up and absorb the scenery. Homestays for those who want to relax and get beneath the surface of Himalayan life are a popular choice for tourists. The biggest concern can be the lack of home comforts and the intense altitude that can have disastrous effects if not respected by a traveller. However, a little knowledge of how to handle the conditions goes a long way, and enables you to reach new heights – quite literally – in your experience of the world.

With so many different areas to cover, consider the time of year you are travelling and adjust your plans accordingly. For the eastern parts of the Himalayas, such as northeast India, Bhutan, China and Nepal, aim for April to October, or any time when the summer monsoon season has settled. Northern areas (known as the Tibetan Himalayas), such as Zanskar and Ladakh, enjoy much better weather in July and August. Spreading across three of Pakistan's provinces, the southern side of the Himalayas is best in May to October. The western regions of Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan/southern Tajikistan, India's districts of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and central Nepal is best seen between October and March.

Depending on the kind of traveller you are, you will want to adjust your budget accordingly too, to ensure you are safe, warm and secure. Basic lodges in the more popular trekking areas, such as Everest, the Annapurna region and Ladakh's Markha valley, are popular for those not looking

Consider a guided tour through the jungle and along the outcrops

to sleep in a tent, and are on a more limited budget. From this area, it is also possible to reach Annapurna, or Nepal's Langtang region, by bus, saving the need for costly internal flights. If you're looking for a more rugged experience like trekking through the remote and desolate areas at your own pace, either as an individual or part of a group, a guide is essential. With multiple trails that can be tailored to your needs, there is an unlimited amount of ways to see the world's tallest mountains.

Should you be interested in experiencing a sample of the amazing biodiversity the Himalayas have to offer, consider a guided tour through the jungle and along rocky outcrops that bring you out to the snow-capped Mount Phongun Razi, combining the outback of Southeast Asia with the dramatic backdrop of the Himalayas, intertwined with a taste of the cultural temples of Bagan.

While it is easy to assume that a trip to the Himalayas is all action-packed trekking with a need for the survival skills of Bear Grylls, there is a more peaceful and leisurely side to the mountains. If a calmer pace is more your style, but you are still looking for an amazing experience, then consider paying a visit to the high Tibetan Plateau where monasteries still buzz with the hum of murmured mantras, and monks lead vigils by the flicker of yak-butter lamps.

Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, also houses fascinating Buddhist relics at its multi-storey stupa, although you won't find as much peace and tranquillity in this city! It's a wonderful place, but if you're still craving less hustle and bustle yet would like the stunning views then perhaps a stay in the Nepali villages of Landruk and Ghandruk will satisfy your desire for relaxation.

The Himalayas are the perfect camping spot for getting closer to nature

At only approximately 2,500 metres (8,200 feet) above sea level, the area has much to offer, even just a small distance up, with stunning views of the Annapurna range and the seventh-highest peak in the world: the pyramid of Dhaulagiri. Altogether, Nepal is a fantastic place to explore with its convenient treks and jaw-dropping peaks.

The Chitwan National Park on the Indian border has lots to offer its visitors, while the Kashmir Great Lakes are the ideal place for budding photographers and nature lovers, with rolling meadows and a series of alpine lakes.

Many of the Himalayan people live a life largely untouched by the modern age. The list of things to see and do is endless, but no matter what you want out of your visit, the Himalayas have something for every kind of traveller at every kind of level.

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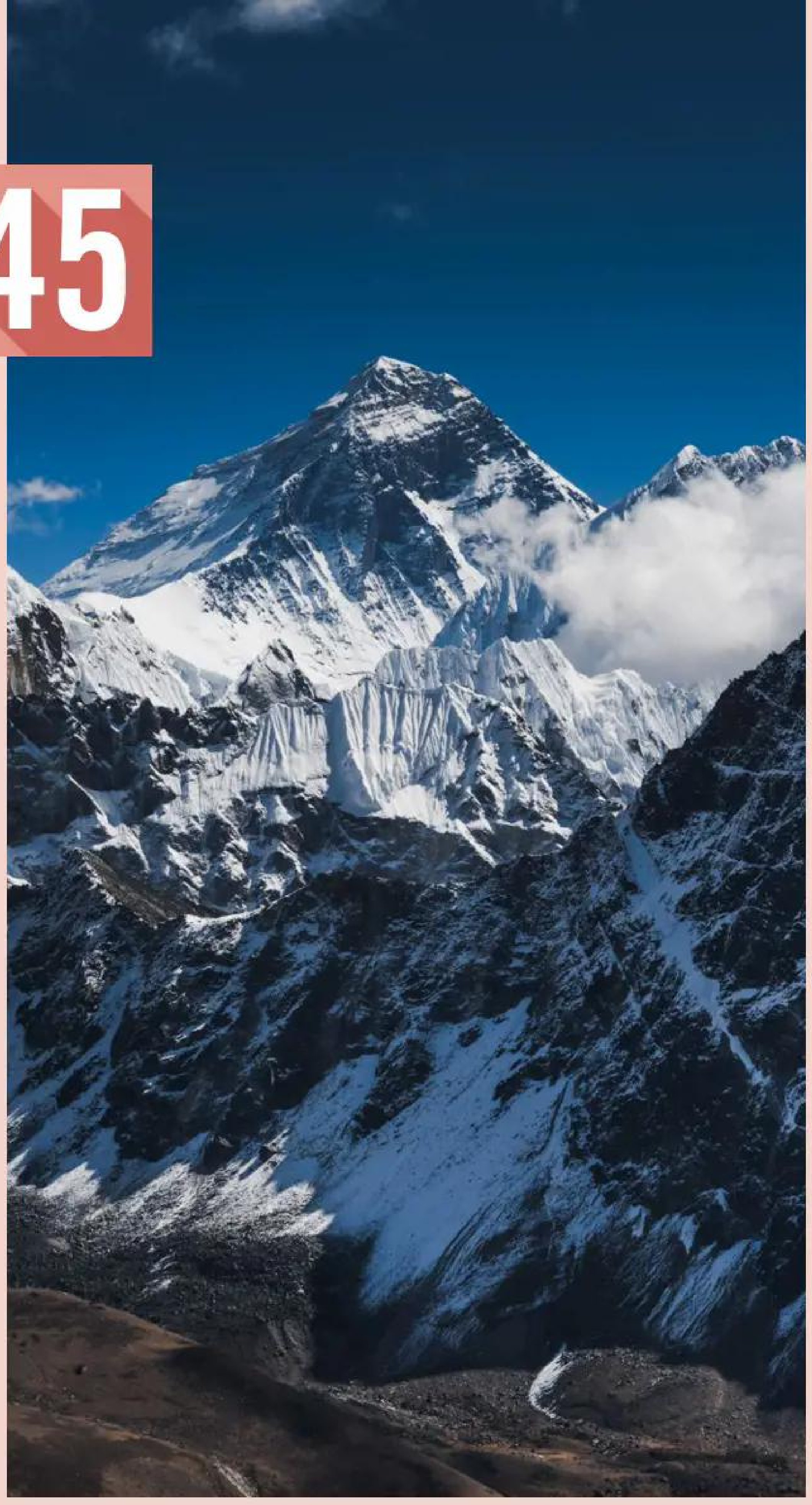
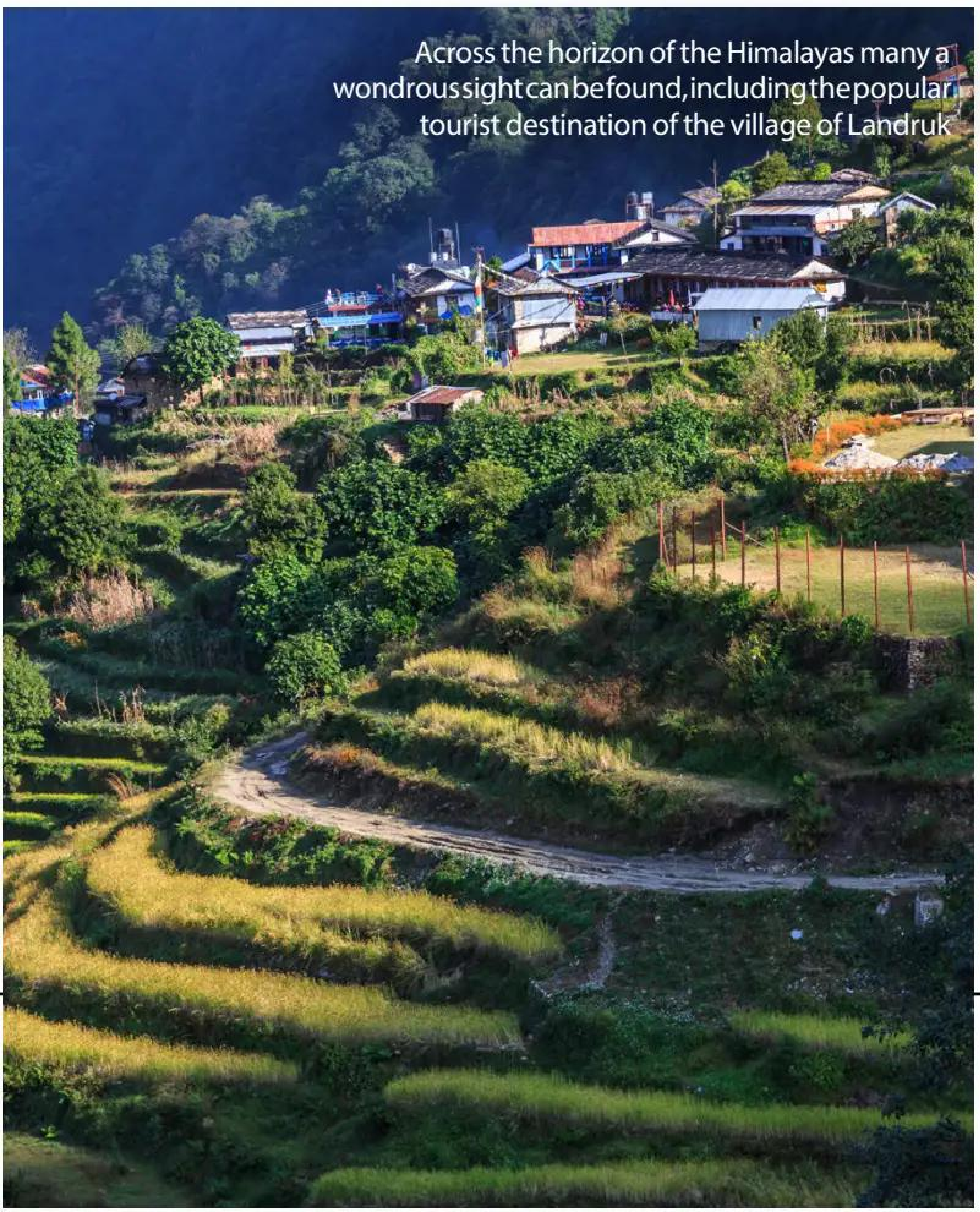


Mount Everest

How would it feel to stand on top of the tallest mountain in the world? There's no doubt about it, at 8,848 metres (29,028 feet) tall, Mount Everest is a force to be reckoned with but a stunning one at that. However, only around 4,000 people in the world have completed the trek to its peak, with some having done it in a single day. From the summit of Everest there is a rare and stunning sight stretched out in front of its champions. From the top, the curvature of the Earth can be seen, as well as panoramic views below. Two great highlights on Mount Everest include Rongbuk Monastery, the highest temple in the world belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist monks; and Everest Base Camp, the biggest base camp for mountaineers who want to conquer the highest peak in the world.


Across the horizon of the Himalayas many a wondrous sight can be found, including the popular tourist destination of the village of Landruk

The district of Leh is located in Ladakh and has a population density of three inhabitants per square kilometre (7.8 per square mile)

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THE FORBIDDEN CITY

Jump into the heart of China's imperial history in one of the world's most unique palace complexes

If you want to explore China's vibrant history, the Forbidden City is the place to start. While the emperors were ruling, you wouldn't have dared step inside – you probably couldn't have even tried with its 54-metre-wide (177-foot-wide) moat and ten-metre-high (33-foot-high) walls – but now the doors have been flung open and everyone can uncover imperial China in all of its red and gold glory.

Nestled in the heart of the bustling capital of Beijing, on the north side of the famous Tiananmen Square, this sprawling palatial complex that covers 720,000 square metres was home to 24 Chinese emperors from 1368 to 1911. Opulently decorated, there are more than 90 courtyards, 980 buildings and more than 8,728 rooms in total, so as you can imagine, there's rather a lot to see!

Attracting 14 million visitors a year, there are bound to be a lot of people at the Forbidden City when you visit, but don't let that put you off. The architecture alone is stunning, with the entire complex built to adhere to the Chinese practice of feng shui. The walls are painted a vibrant red – China's lucky colour – and the roofs are just one way you can tell the importance of each individual building.

The city itself can be split into three sections: the defences, the outer court and the inner court. As previously mentioned, an extremely wide moat runs around the entire complex, which was important in protecting against rebels and raiders. There are only four gates to enter, and the one that is most used is the Meridian Gate, which can be accessed through the Gate of Heavenly Peace on Tiananmen Square.

You'll then find yourself in the outer court, where grand ceremonies and state affairs were conducted. It's here that you'll locate the most important building in the whole complex: the Hall of Supreme Harmony, home to the magnificent Dragon Throne of the emperors. The other two buildings you'll find here are the Hall of Central Harmony, where the emperor rested before grand events, and the Hall of Preserving Harmony, which was used for banquets.

When you continue on, you'll end up at a huge block of marble with cloud and dragon designs. Keep going straight and you'll find yourself walking through the Gate of Heavenly Purity and into the inner court, which was the main living area of China's famed emperors. Here you'll discover the Palace of Heavenly Purity, the leaders' sleeping quarters; the Palace of Union and Peace, where the emperors' seals were stored; and the Hall of Terrestrial Tranquility, the emperors' wedding venue.

Steeped in history and beautifully decorated, the Forbidden City really can't be missed on any trip to China or the Far East. With so much to explore, including a museum with many featured exhibitions, it should rocket to the top of everyone's list of places to see.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

It might take longer than you think to see everything, so make sure you give yourself plenty of time!

Best time to visit:

November to March (it's less busy)

Time zone:

UTC+8

CURRENCY

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CHINESE RENMINBI

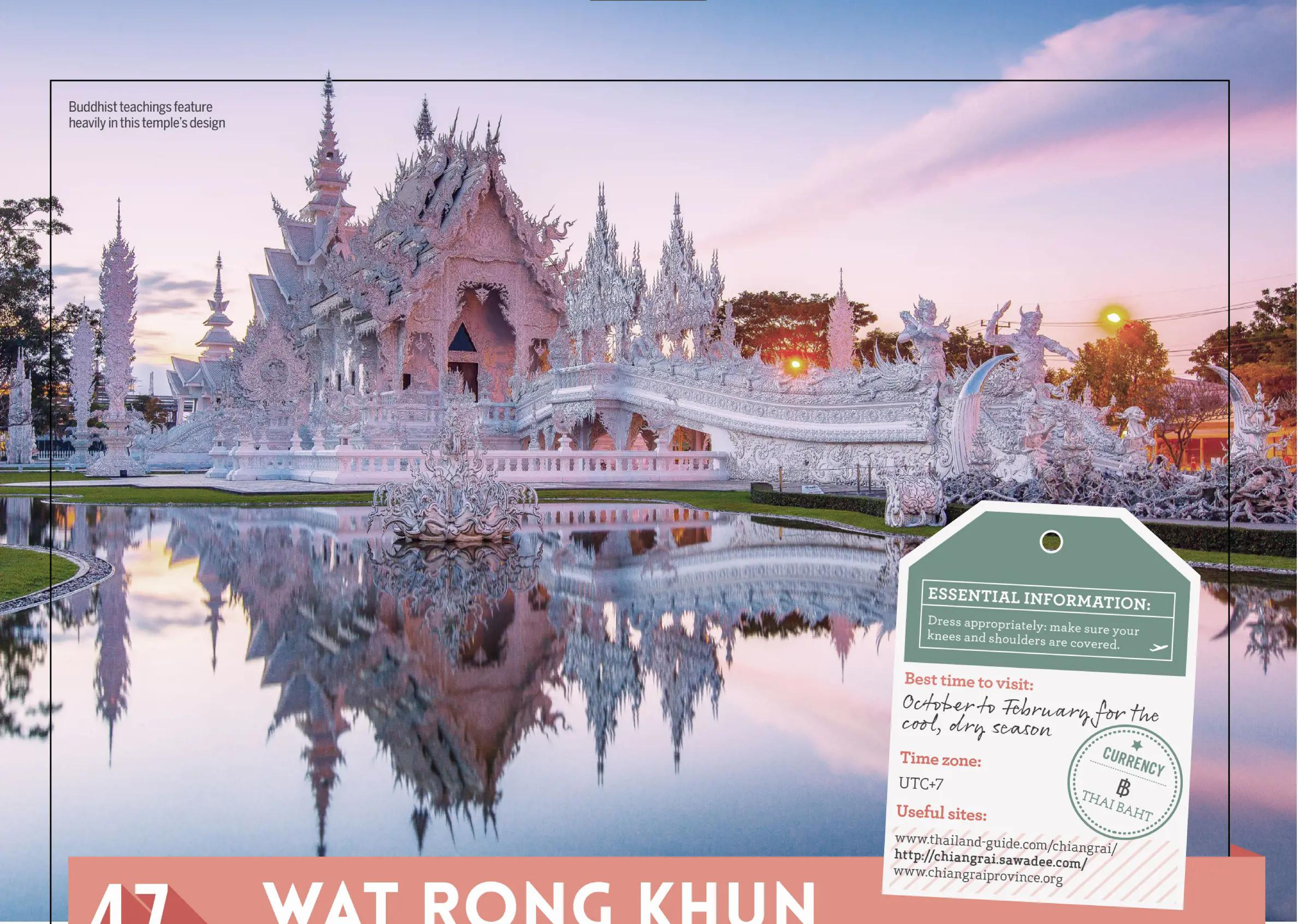
Useful sites:

en.dpm.org.cn

www.travelchinaguide.com/cityguides/beijing/forbidden.htm

www.chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/

Only 40 per cent of the Forbidden City is open to the public, but that's more than enough to keep you busy!



Buddhist teachings feature heavily in this temple's design

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Dress appropriately: make sure your knees and shoulders are covered.

Best time to visit:

October to February for the cool, dry season

Time zone:

UTC+7

CURRENCY
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THAI BAHT

Useful sites:

www.thailand-guide.com/chiangrai/
http://chiangrai.sawadee.com/
www.chiangraiprovince.org

47 WAT RONG KHUN

Modern art meets architecture in this unmissable temple of Thailand

As you walk over the narrow white bridge of Wat Rong Khun, you'll pass by hundreds of beseeching hands, seemingly bursting out of the ground. These unsettling sculptures symbolise desire, and visitors must cross over this sea of suffering souls to gain entrance to this unique complex. Also known as the 'White Temple', this masterpiece is the vision of Chalermchai Kositpipat, a painter famous for his use of Buddhist imagery in his work.

Unlike traditional Thai temples decorated with vibrant colours, Wat Rong Khun is stark white. According to the artist, white represents the purity of Buddha, while the glittering glass mosaics that adorn the exterior signify heavenly enlightenment and wisdom. Every inch of this intricate building carries meaning, designed to prompt people to reflect on the Buddhist teachings. The bridge, for example, represents overcoming worldly temptations and finding the path to happiness.

At the other end, you'll arrive at the 'Gate of Heaven', and beyond that lies the most important structure of any wat (temple): the ubosot. This is the main prayer room, where even more startling design features await. Instead of murals depicting scenes from Buddhist stories, there are paintings of demons interspersed with Western icons like Elvis, Neo from *The Matrix* and Superman, as well as Hello Kitty. There's even a depiction of the Twin Towers of the former World Trade Center, with the likeness of George W Bush and Osama bin Laden. The artist explained this inclusion was because: "I want everyone to know that our world is being destroyed by those who craved to build weapons that kill, thereby ruining the environment because nothing is ever enough."

Contrasting wildly with the white exterior is an opulent golden building. This is actually the public toilets – a comment on society's obsession with material possessions and wealth – a priceless opportunity to spend a penny in style. Aside from this, the only pops of colour come from the references to pop culture throughout the grounds, with the heads of Captain America and the Terminator hanging from trees. Visitors can also add their own decorations by purchasing a medallion to write their own message on and hang from one of the ornate, metal wishing trees, or alternatively throw some coins into the well inside the Pavilion.

When this extraordinary temple opened its doors in 1997, it had plenty of critics who disapproved of the break from Thai tradition. Today, it's a hugely popular destination for tourists and locals alike, and the complex is still not finished. Eventually there will be a total of nine buildings, but the facades are so detailed and demanding that construction is set to continue until 2070!

Located near Chiang Rai, the northernmost province, you can reach the temple by bus, tuk-tuk or car. Check the opening hours before you go, and aim to get there early to try and beat the crowds. Photography is permitted in the grounds, but no image can completely capture how stunning this structure is to behold. With more than 33,000 temples in Thailand to explore, Wat Rong Khun is truly unique.

48 RIVER GANGES

Life on India's Ganges is colourful, dark, enlightening and thought-provoking all at the same time

The Ganges is one of the world's largest rivers, descending from the Himalayas and continuing in a wide, slow-flowing stream for 2,525 kilometres (1,568 miles) across the fertile lands of India. Eventually finding its way into the Bay of Bengal, it is highly sacred, worshipped as a goddess in Hinduism and believed capable of cleansing the sins of the faithful due to its perceived purity.

Touching the lives of hundreds of millions of people, it is a wonder, a lifeblood and an essential all rolled into one. If you seek a good reflection of Indian life, you need venture no further than its banks, where scores of people gather each day. It is difficult to think of a more widely used river in the world, and its significance is stark.

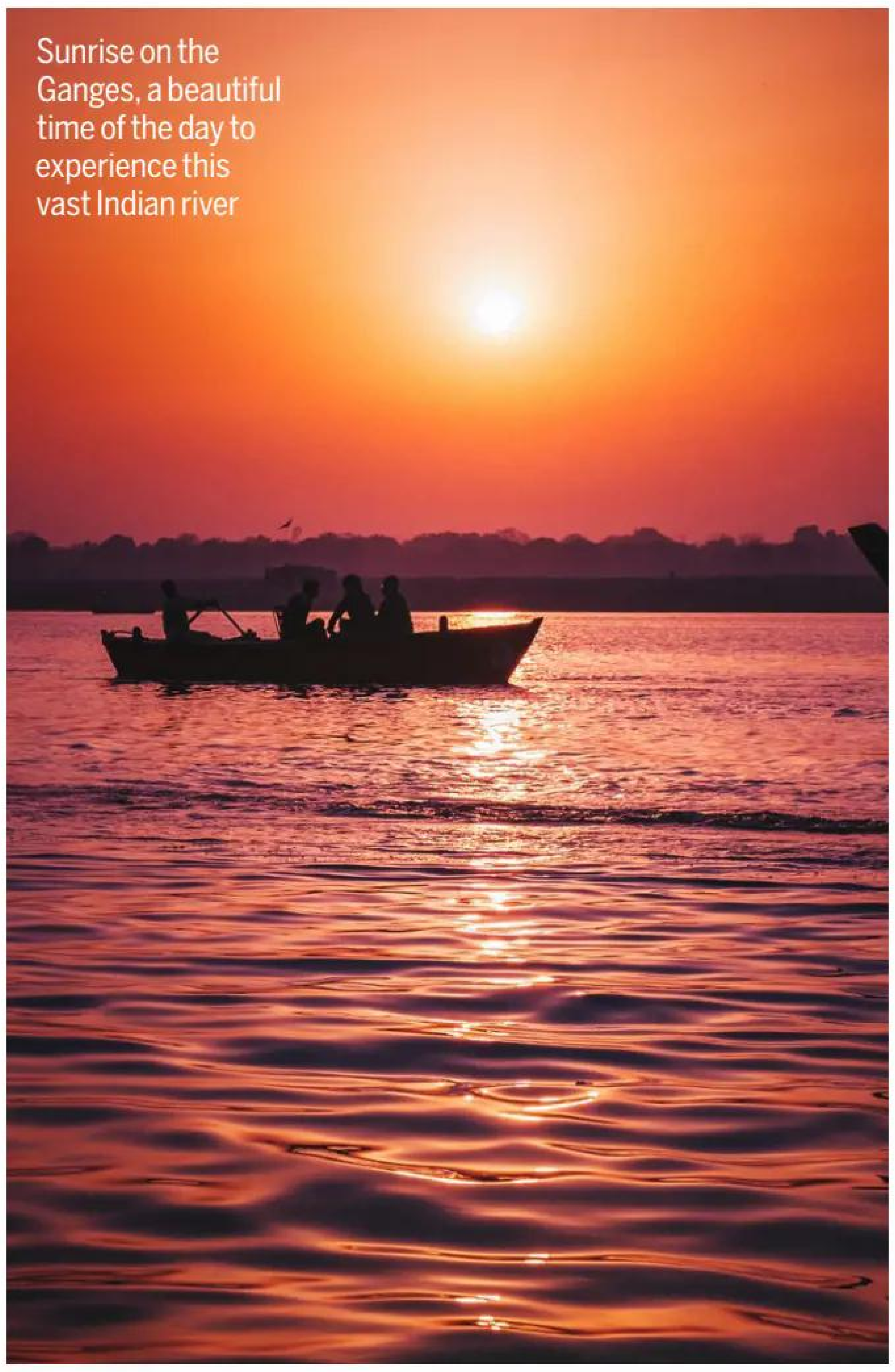
To bear witness to one of the most sacred places in Hinduism, you should plan a trek to Gomukh, the terminus of the Gangotri Glacier and the source of the Bhagirathi River, which feeds the Ganges. Pilgrims visit to take a holy dip in the ice-cold water, although it's not a trip to take lightly given that it will entail an eight-hour walk over some 16 kilometres (10 miles).

More preferable, perhaps, is a visit elsewhere along the Ganges itself. You could take your pick of cities sprawled by the banks, from Mirzapur, Bhagalpur, Haridwar and Kanpur to Varanasi, Farrukhabad, Kannauj, Chakeri and Munger, among others. Rishikesh is as good a place as any to begin, situated in the foothills of the Himalayas and occupying both sides of the Ganges in a series of settlements.

Most notably, Rishikesh is known as the yoga capital of the world, and it is here where you can visit one of the many ashrams, retreats and shalas to understand techniques of meditation, breathing, cleansing and physical posture. You could attain peace in the most tranquil of settings as you associate with your inward soul and seek self-illumination, and you may even gain great inspiration: John Lennon was moved to record *The Happy Rishikesh Song*, and The Beatles' time at the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi ashram in 1968 was the band's most productive.

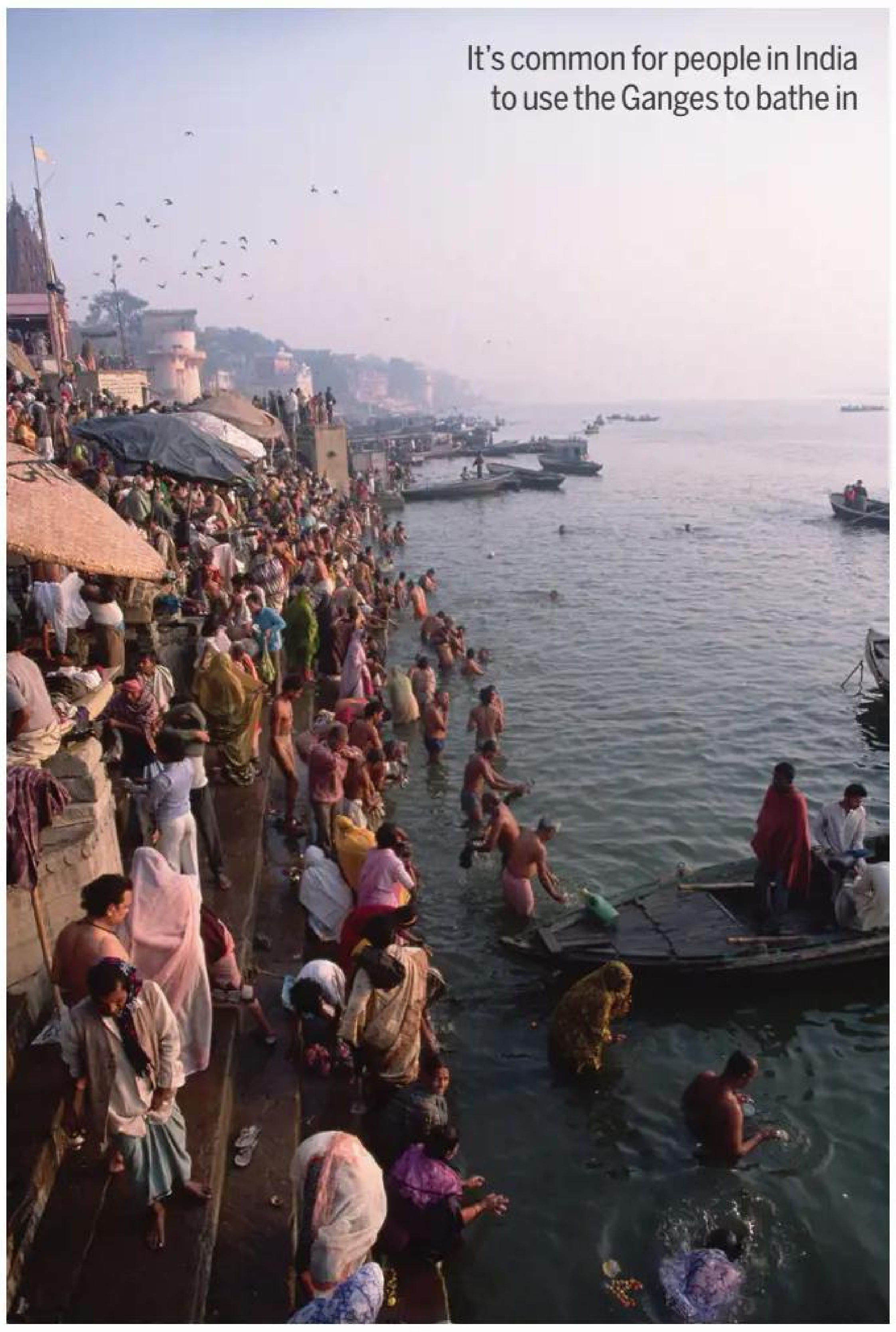
Ashrams are common along the river banks, offering spiritual activities as well as relatively inexpensive accommodation, proving perfect for relaxation and a way of soaking up the atmosphere and significance of the Ganges areas without breaking the bank. Visit the ancient city of Haridwar and you'll certainly see life. It is one of the four locations of the Kumbh Mela religious festival (Ujjain, Nashik and Allahabad being the others), and it attracts millions of pilgrims, pouring into the city via road and rail, from the air and on foot in a bid to dip into the Ganges and cleanse themselves of sin. They are led by naked men smeared with ash, and it is believed the practice liberates from the cycle of life, death and rebirth. You have to time it well, however, since the festival is held four times every 12 years.

More regular is Ganga Dussehra, which celebrates the believed descent of the Ganges from heaven to Earth. Hindu devotees travel



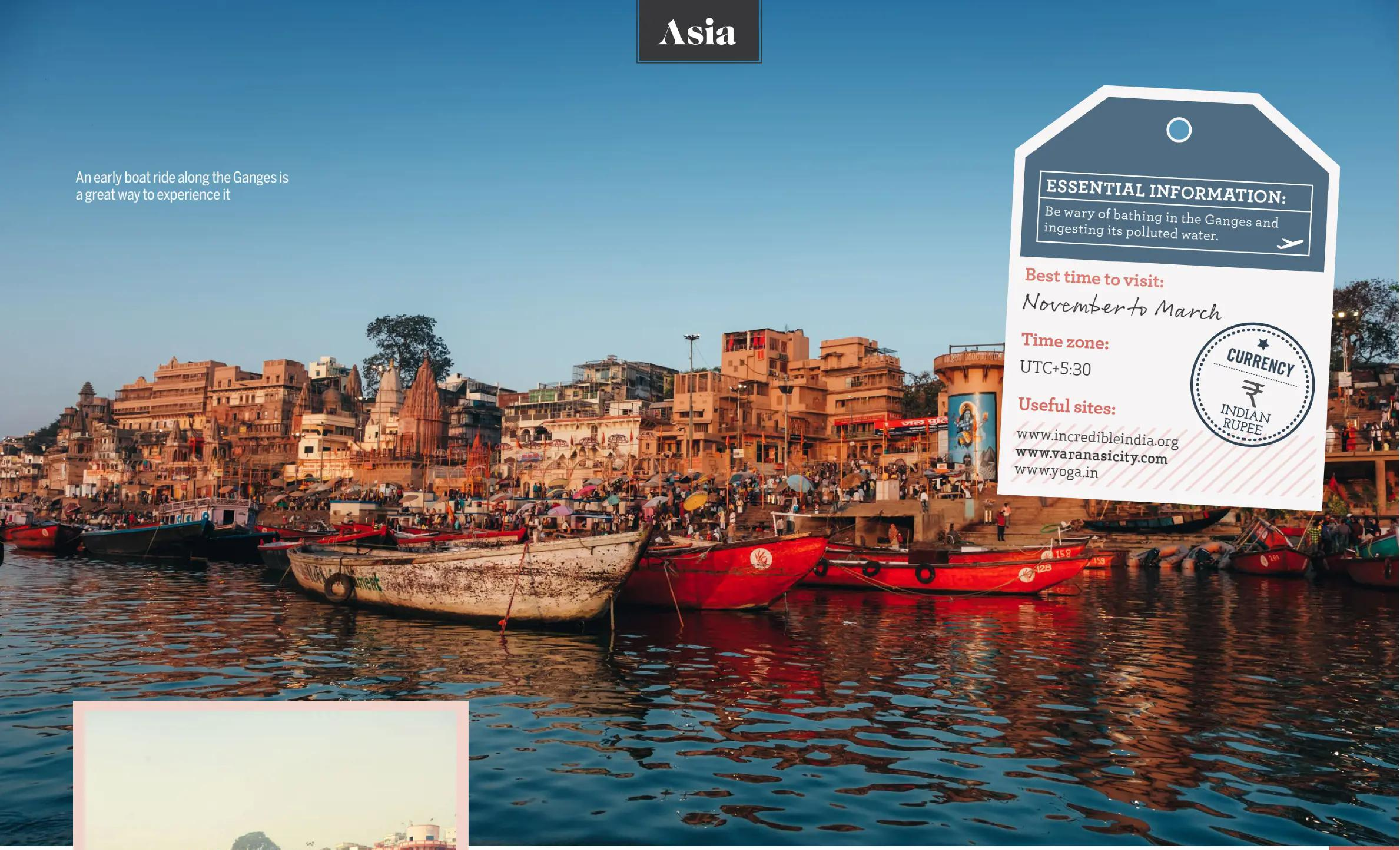
Sunrise on the Ganges, a beautiful time of the day to experience this vast Indian river

It is a wonder, a lifeblood and an essential all rolled into one



It's common for people in India to use the Ganges to bathe in

Early Morning view of Har-Ki-Pauri Ghat at Haridwar



An early boat ride along the Ganges is a great way to experience it

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Be wary of bathing in the Ganges and ingesting its polluted water.

Best time to visit:

November to March

Time zone:

UTC+5:30

Useful sites:

www.incredibleindia.org

www.varanasicity.com

www.yoga.in

CURRENCY

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INDIAN RUPEE

to the Sangram where the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati converge on the tenth day of the waxing moon of the Hindu calendar month, Jyeshtha, although it is also marked throughout the states where the river flows. People celebrate over the nine preceding days too, washing in the river to rid them of their sins while offering prayers to the Goddess Ganga ahead of the monsoon season. For this, Haridwar, Allahabad and Rishikesh are the key locations.

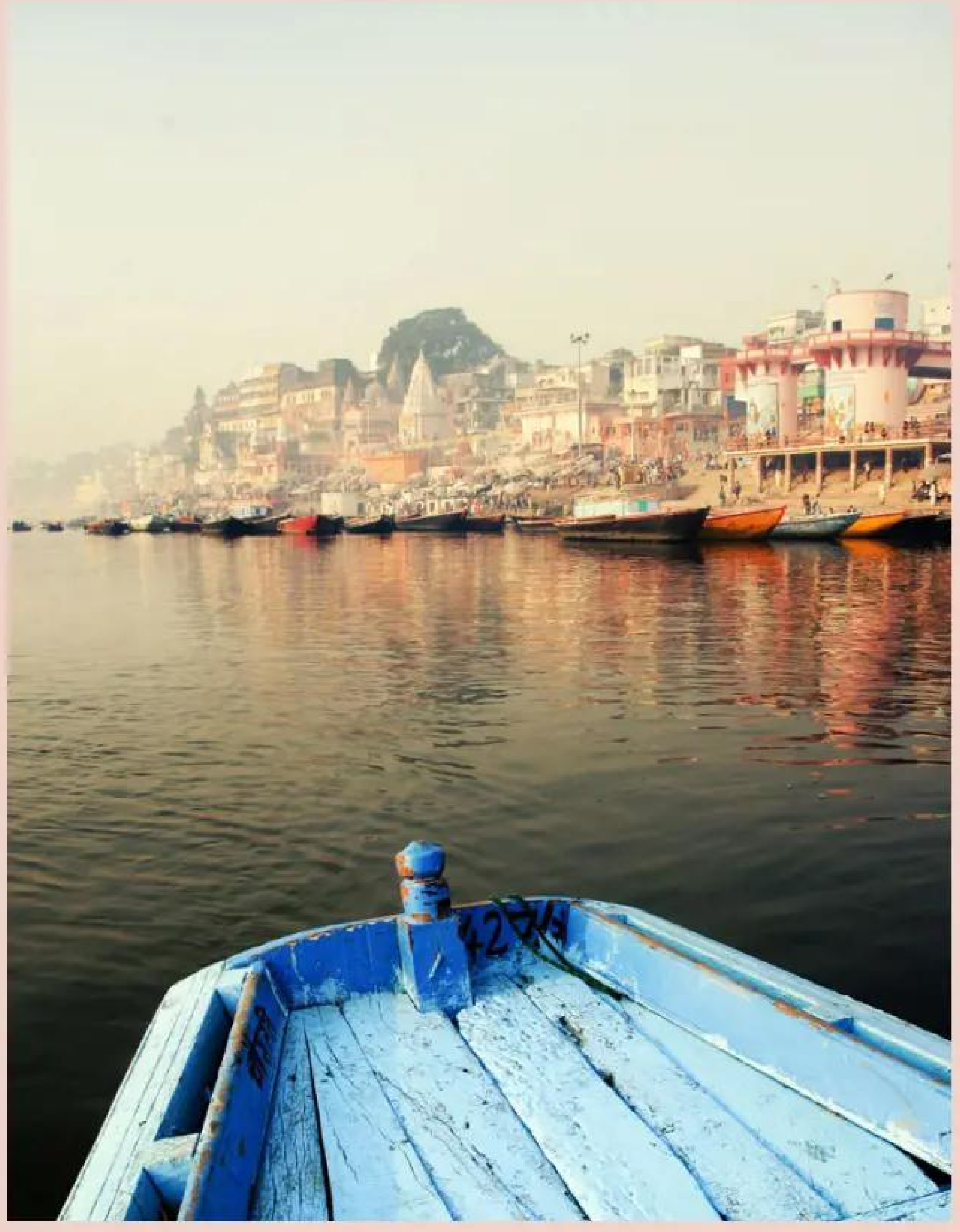
To reach the river, you descend down stone steps that punctuate the Ganges along the bank. Called ghats, they enable easy access to the water, and you'll see hundreds of people gathered around them as they seek to engage in religious ceremonies and wash their clothes or bodies. The most stunning and important of these is the Dashashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi, which is said to have been originally built by Lord Brahma to welcome Lord Shiva, and where Lord Brahma sacrificed ten horses. That said, the current ghat was created in 1748 by Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao and rebuilt in 1774.

It is colourful, full of life and smells, and packed with people trying to sell you things, whether it's a boat ride on the Ganges, a massage or some wares in a nearby shop. Hang around for long enough, though, and you'll encounter an elaborate river worship performed by saffron-wearing pundits in a lively atmosphere of dance, prayer and fiery lamps in the evening. A trip to the Ganges really is not complete without experiencing this.

Other ghats include Manikarnika, also in Varanasi, where it is thought a dead human's soul can find salvation when cremated there, as well as Panchganga Ghat, which is quieter and the place where five sacred rivers converge: the Ganges, Saraswati, Yamuna, Kirana and Dhupapapa. Many Hindus will descend on Harishchandra Ghat to wash the bodies of their relatives in the river after death ahead of their cremation. At the same time, you'll encounter sadhus – religious monks and devout Hindus and Jains who renounce the worldly life and instead choose a path of spiritual discipline. Colourfully dressed, their faces painted and beards flowing, there are as many as five million, revered and supported by donations.

All of this activity around the Ganges, however, does have its downfalls. While there are dolphins and fish life in the river, it is also heavily polluted due to its excessive use (including the burning of bodies at the cremation ghats). Although it has sustained a huge number of the world's population for millennia, the Ganges also contains untreated sewage, pesticides and industrial waste. For that reason, it's best to take to the water in a boat rather than swim, but even then you should be wary, particularly of luxury cruises, which Hindu priests worry will pollute the river further.

But that is the Ganges in a mere nutshell: a river of life, death, work, pleasure, religious highs and mundane lows. Attempts are being made to improve its health, but there is no doubt that even without a decent clean-up, it will invigorate you and give you a new-found lust for adventure and a desire to discover. As India's mother, you'll be well looked after.

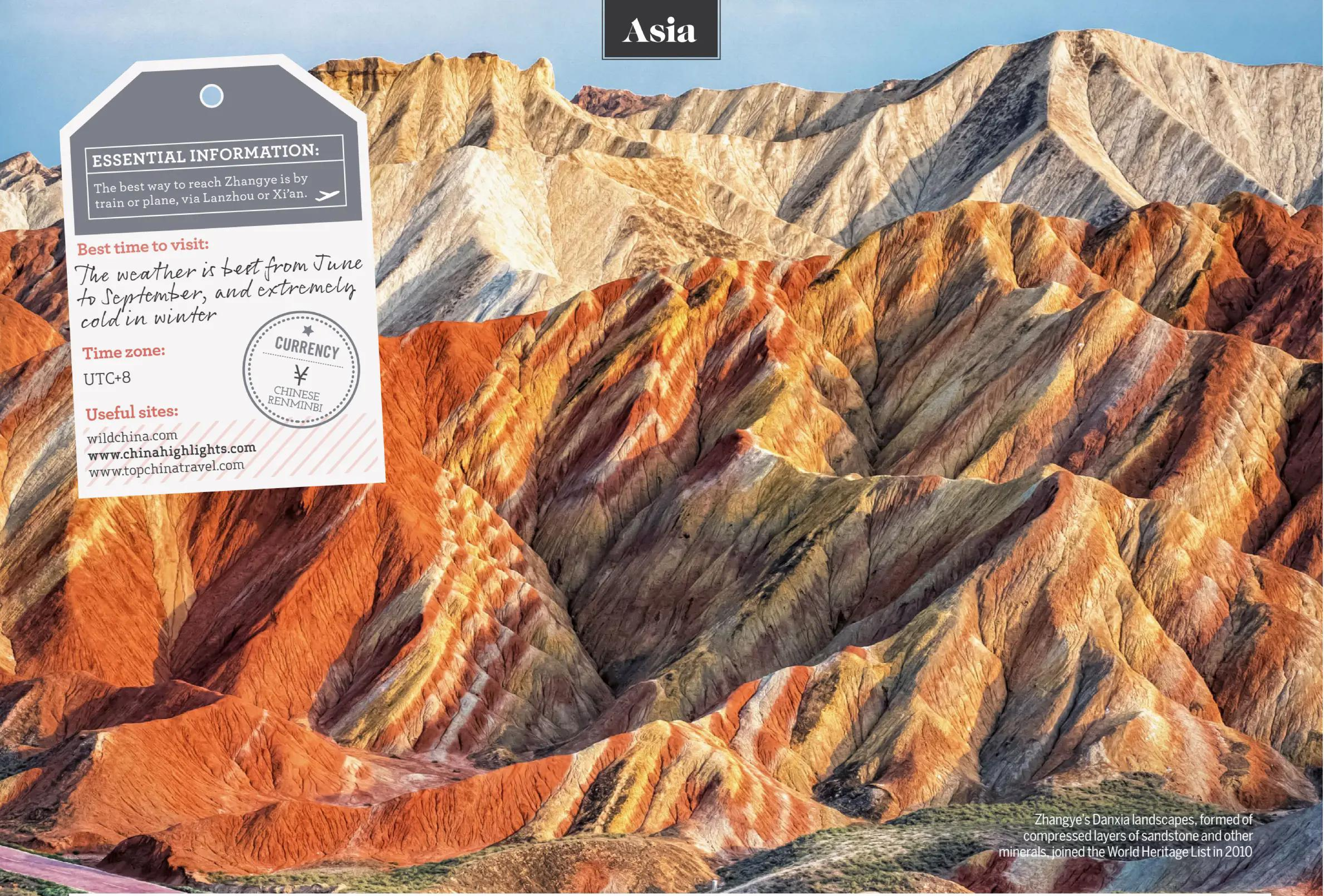


Visit Varanasi

Each year since the 6th century BCE, Indians have made a pilgrimage to the holy Hindu city of Varanasi to bathe in the Ganges, burn their dead, meditate and worship. Situated in the Uttar Pradesh state of north India, it's the home of the Ganga Aarti religious ritual and a cultural centre for the region, known for its 88 ghats along the river, each of which comes with its own spiritual specialities.

If there is one city along the Ganges to visit, then this is it. Take a boat on the river, particularly at sunrise or sunset, and your eyes will be blessed with the most serene of sights. Watch out for dolphins along the way, and be sure to visit the holy structures, notably the Kashi Vishwanath Temple that is dedicated to Lord Shiva and has three domes made of pure gold.

Colourful, lively and with surprises around ever corner, Varanasi is the city that perfectly welds life and death.



Zhangye's Danxia landscapes, formed of compressed layers of sandstone and other minerals, joined the World Heritage List in 2010

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

The best way to reach Zhangye is by train or plane, via Lanzhou or Xi'an.

Best time to visit:

The weather is best from June to September, and extremely cold in winter

Time zone:

UTC+8

CURRENCY
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CHINESE RENMINBI

Useful sites:

wildchina.com
www.chinahighlights.com
www.topchinatravel.com

49 ZHANGYE NATIONAL GEOPARK

Nestled in China's westernmost reaches is a landscape of heavenly and otherworldly wonders

While China's northwest frontier is a rugged land of desert and mountain, Zhangye is home to a truly alien landscape unlike anything you will have seen before. Here, once a crucial post on the Silk Road, rising rainbows of stone stretch to the horizon, like an ocean of psychedelic fire. These Danxia, China's steep landscapes developed on red sedimentary beds, were formed of compressed layers of sandstone and other minerals, then raised by tectonic activity and sculpted by the forces of Mother Nature.

Zhangye Danxia National Geological Park is largely split between the Colourful Hills Scenic Area and the Binggou Ice Valley, each with numerous spectacular viewing platforms, easily accessible via the park bus. The Colourful Hills are an overwhelming visual feast; in places, it is as if a rainbow were stamped onto the rugged terrain, in others, impressionist ribbons of bright hues dart upwards as if trying to touch heaven. Sections are given eccentric monikers, such as Sleeping Beauty, Huge Scallop and Monkeys Viewing the Sea of Fire. A hot air balloon ride over this area is perhaps the closest thing to an out-of-body experience.

Meanwhile, local tourists flock to the Ice Valley to hunt unique rock formations, forming pagodas, pillars, temples and even Buddhas. Rather more muted, these reddish outcrops jut upwards, coated in soft layers of vegetation. The Buddhist imagery rife throughout the valley is fitting, given the abundance of nearby monastic marvels.

The aptly named Giant Buddha Temple, dating back to 1098, houses the country's largest reclining Buddha, alongside 18 clay sculptures and Qing murals. At 35-metres (115-feet) long, the wooden structure is housed in a magnificent temple, complete with Ming-era stupa – supposedly the site of Kublai Khan's birth.

Elsewhere, Mati Si, or Horse Hoof Temple, is a spectacular set of labyrinths named after an alleged heavenly horse hoofprint left in one of its many grottos. From a distance, it looks as if a giant has punched holes into the mountain and then stuffed them with pagodas. The complex, carved by Yugur Tibetan Buddhists between the 5th and 14th centuries, is spread over an intriguing network of grottos, caves, platforms and winding staircases.

Though two to three hours by car or train, it is also possible to sneak in a visit to Jiayuguan Fort, the most westerly frontier of the Great Wall of China. Guarding the narrowest point of a desert valley, this fortress was built of loess, rather than the typical stone and brick, and served as the country's gateway to Central Asia. The western Gate of Conciliation, built in 1506, doubled as an exit point for banished citizens, who scribbled lamentations on the exterior Gate of Sorrow. Also nearby is China's very own 'Grand Canyon', Pingshanhu, which comes complete with a leisurely winding hike around its remarkable otherworldly formations.

While few sights can rival sunset over the Colourful Hills, one alternative is Zhangye National Wetland Park; a peaceful oasis along the Heihe River. A combination of river, marsh and artificial wetlands, the park is home to hundreds of plant and animal species. Amidst a backdrop of desert and mountain, it makes for a stunning send off – courtesy of a bicycle ride for two.

50 MOUNT FUJI

One of Japan's most historic sites, Mount Fuji is a breathtaking wonder in the height of summer

If you take the train between the Japanese cities of Tokyo and Osaka on a cold winter's day, when the thick clouds that often hang in the air have dispersed, you might be lucky enough to catch a rare but perfect glimpse of the picturesque Mount Fuji. A stunning centrepiece of Japanese culture standing proudly over the border between Yamanashi and Shizuoka Prefecture, it has captivated the world thanks to its stunning beauty from afar, but atop of Fuji's summit at 3,776 metres (12,388 feet), there is much to be discovered at various times of the year.

Officially, Mount Fuji is open for climbing in July via a variety of routes. However, it can be enjoyed on any given day in a much more leisurely way thanks to the Fuji Five Lakes region at the northern foot of the mountain, Hakone, a hot spring resort where visitors can bask in the naturally warm waters, heated thanks to the underground volcanicity, and two ski resorts (Fujiten Snow Resort and Snow Town Yeti) that give visitors a chance to enjoy skiing alongside this vast natural wonder.

A trek up Mount Fuji is a popular leisure activity among the Japanese, but also tourists who make up a third of visitors to the mountain every year. While it is technically open all year round, early July to mid September is the official climbing season when the trails are free of snow, weather is mild and public transport runs frequently. Only experienced climbers are advised to climb Mount Fuji in late June or September due to the temperatures at the summit plummeting to well below freezing. From October to around mid June, climbing to the summit is highly advised against due to extreme wind and weather conditions, snow, ice and a risk of avalanches. Specific trails will open on certain dates, with the Yoshida Trail typically opening to the public on 1 July, while the Subashiri, Gotemba and Fujinomiya Trails open a week or two afterwards, depending on the weather.

The path to the summit of Mount Fuji is divided into ten stations. The first station begins at the foot of the mountain, where paved roads lead the way to one of four 5th stations halfway up the mountain, which have varying altitudes (between 1,400 to 2,400 metres (4,593 to 7,874 feet)) and are for most the starting point of their ascent to the 10th station at the summit. Views up the mountain allow climbers to see across the major cities and landmarks of Japan, and are especially fantastic at sunrise. As you ascend the mountain, you will notice how the native flora varies as the altitude increases.

If you're concerned about the level of fitness needed to climb to the summit, have no fear, those with limited or no hiking experience are welcome, and the path to the top is well sign-posted to warn trekkers of sharp turns or any approaching hazards. One thing is certain, once you've done it you'll never look at the postcard-picture image in the same way ever again.

Japan's beautiful Mount Fuji is in fact a stratovolcano, although it hasn't erupted since 1707

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Pack suitable shoes and clothing.

Best time to visit:

Early July to early September (official climbing season)

Time zone:

UTC+9

CURRENCY

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JAPANESE YEN

Useful sites:

www.japan-guide.com
www.fujisan-climb.jp/en
www.trulytokyo.com/climbing-or-visiting-mount-fuji-from-tokyo

51 HA LONG BAY

It's easy to see why Vietnamese folk tales attribute Ha Long Bay's isles and caves to divine creation

The wind throws rain through the early morning fog. Giant sculptures rise from turquoise water, upright, as though they could topple at any moment. Suddenly, the skies open up, the sun breaks through and, for a moment, looking over the ship's deck is like staring into the kiln of creation itself.

Long ago, according to legend, the ancient Vietnamese faced constant seaborne invasions from the north. The gods grew so displeased at their plight, the Mother Dragon was sent to help, alongside her children. In the heat of battle, the dragons incinerated the enemy, spitting out numerous jewels, which formed a defensive barrier – forever fortifying the country against northern attackers. These jewels, it is said, later formed into the karsts and isles that now litter the coast of Ha Long Bay.

When UNESCO appointed the seascape of roughly 1,600 islands a World Heritage Site, it was not in recognition of divine origin, but outstanding beauty and great biological interest. However, at first glance, the mythical explanation does not seem so far-fetched.

Voted one of the 'New7Wonders of Nature', Ha Long Bay and neighbouring Bai Tu Long Bay and La Han Bay are characterised by dreamy limestone isles scattered through the aquamarine sea like monoliths from the heavens. The karsts are overrun with lush vegetation, filled with 59 mysterious caves, ripe for exploration.

Though Ha Long Bay is far from secluded, it is home to Sung Sot Cave, nicknamed 'Surprising Cave'. A natural museum of geological formation, it reveals a chasmic grotto of stalactites and stalagmites, embellished with dramatic lighting. The bay's largest cave, it stretches 200 metres (656 feet) long into Bo Hon Island and is, at points, 80 metres (262 feet) wide.

Also nearby is Ti Top Island, home to not only a large stretch of beach, but various hotels, restaurants, bars and luxury resorts. Nestled at the top of the island, named after Russian cosmonaut Gherman Titov, is a spectacularly placed viewing platform – offering truly panoramic views of the ethereal landscape. Many water babies enjoy using the island as a leaping-off point for snorkelling and kayaking expeditions; others simply for a spot of sunbathing.

Luxury and mid-range cruises are perhaps the easiest way to enjoy the bay. Journeys tend to span one or two nights, with on-board cooking classes, sunrise tai chi sessions, late-night drinking bouts and even on-board saunas. They also stop off at Tung Sau Pearl Farm and Huang Thang Commune, the largest floating fishing village in the bay.

However, it is also possible to explore the far quieter Bai Tu Long Bay, where the water is less polluted and more suited for swimming. With

> *Limestone isles scatter through the aquamarine sea like monoliths*

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Don't book a tour until you arrive. Shop around with tour operators, you'll be able to tailor your experience.

Best time to visit:

Spring, from March to May, and autumn, from September to November

Time zone:

UTC+7

CURRENCY

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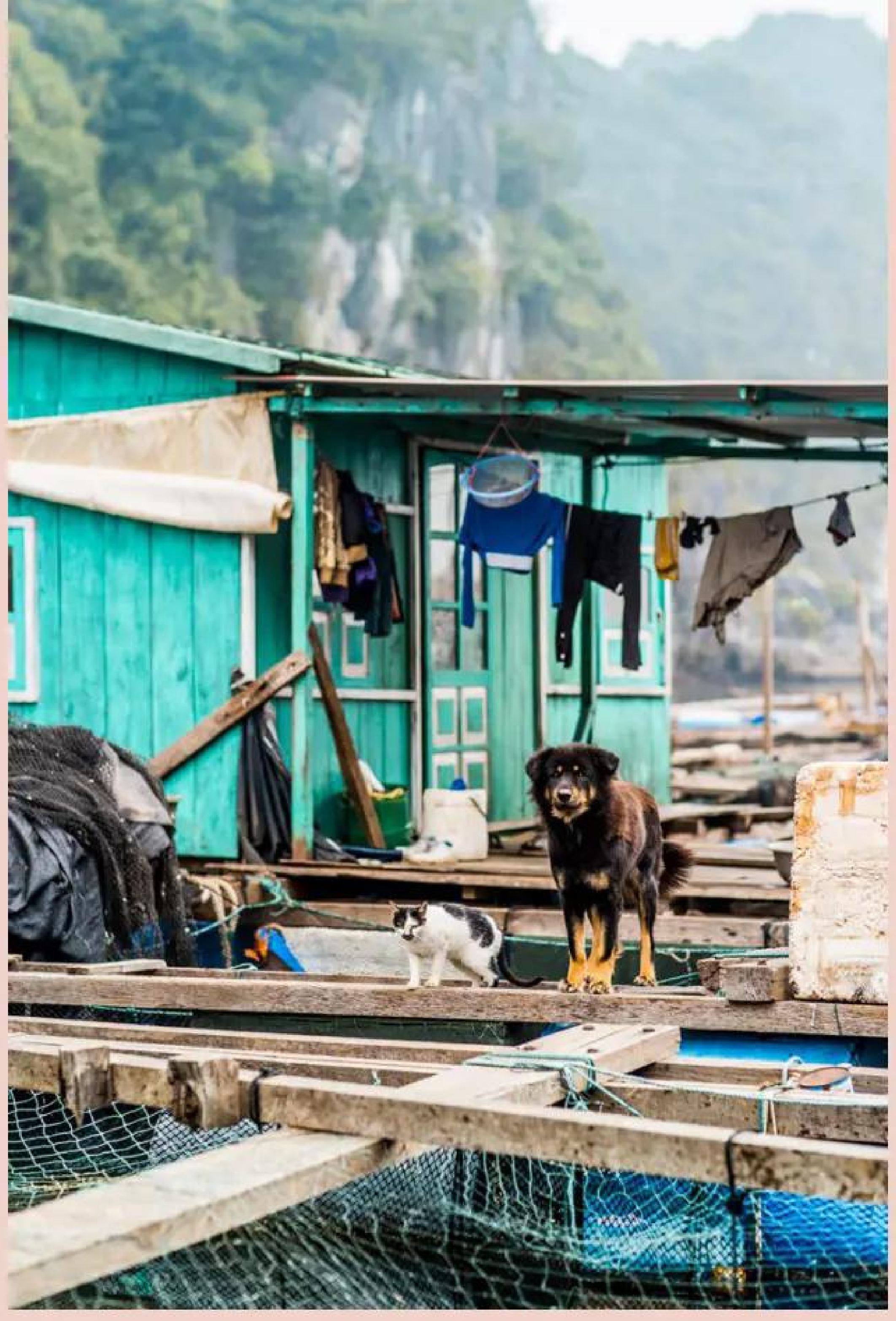
VIETNAMESE DONG

Useful sites:

www.vietnamtourism.com/
ethnictravel.com.vn/
www.bhayagroup.com

Between the limestone isles and the rustic junks, Ha Long Bay truly is a dreamscape



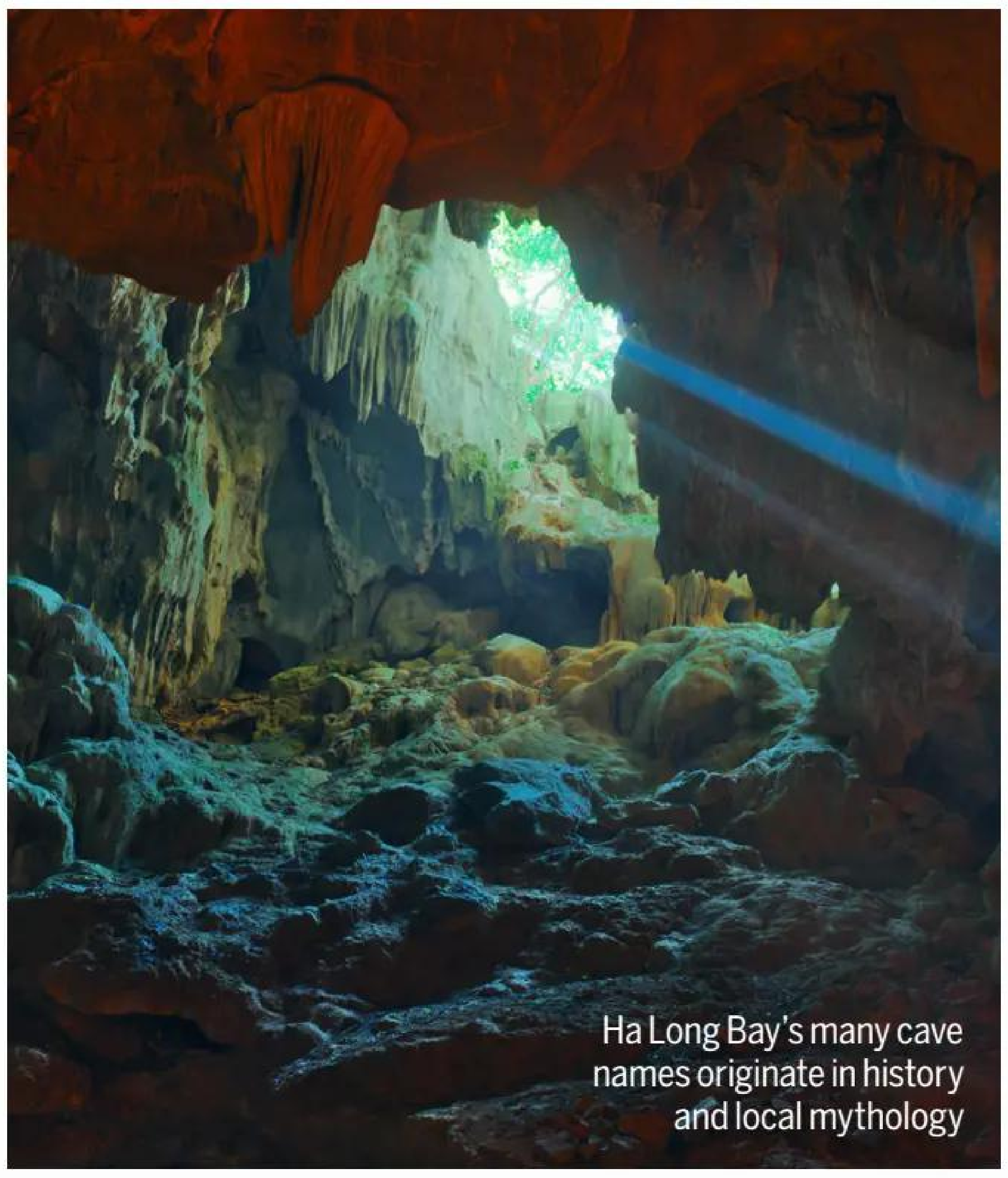
The bay features numerous hidden areas to explore in smaller boats or kayaks

Floating fishing villages

While more than 200,000 people live in the province of Ha Long, roughly 1,000 of them call the waters of Ha Long Bay itself their home. Their 400 wooden houseboats are spread across three main floating villages, which bob atop the crystalline water, a monument of historic life.

Though Ha Long Bay has been inhabited for 18,000 years, the floating villages were founded in the early 19th century in response to rising sea levels; an issue that now jeopardises their future.

With no land and few material possessions, such water-dwellers traditionally sustained themselves through a combination of fishing and aquaculture. Living hand to mouth, children as young as five are well-versed in casting fishing nets. However, today the villagers also depend on tourism. Each household lives on a separate houseboat or raft, which serves as not just their home, but their means of transport and work too.



Ha Long Bay's many cave names originate in history and local mythology

stops at Cap La and Tra San islands, it's possible to enjoy a more leisurely pace, and even a spot of night-time squid fishing, for those who are so inclined. While mid-range cruises may not offer the same spa treatments and massages as their more expensive counterparts, this is hardly the place for eyes-closed pampering.

For a quirkier, shorter experience, Vietnamese expeditions set off from Tuan Chau Pier, 13 kilometres (eight miles) southwest of Ha Long City. These tours, spread over four to six hours, visit Dau Go and Thien Cung caves. While the 25-metre-high (82-foot-high) former is renowned for its magical formations, the latter is known for its shapes resembling mythical beasts and four pillars of heaven; earning it the moniker 'Heaven Cave'. It was also allegedly where the Dragon Prince held his seven-night wedding bonanza.

Such local tours are not only cheaper, but decidedly Vietnamese – with busier boats rocking out to local karaoke hits. However, they can range from charmingly genuine to distractingly claustrophobic.

With mutiny out of the question, the ideal way to explore the quieter La Han Bay is with a private tour; courtesy of smaller operators, such as Eco Friendly Vietnam and Cat Ba Ventures. These personalised trips facilitate peaceful kayaking expeditions through seemingly uncharted caves and coves – slowly enough to keep an eye out for the region's 1,000 species of fish, types of coral and even seals and dolphins.

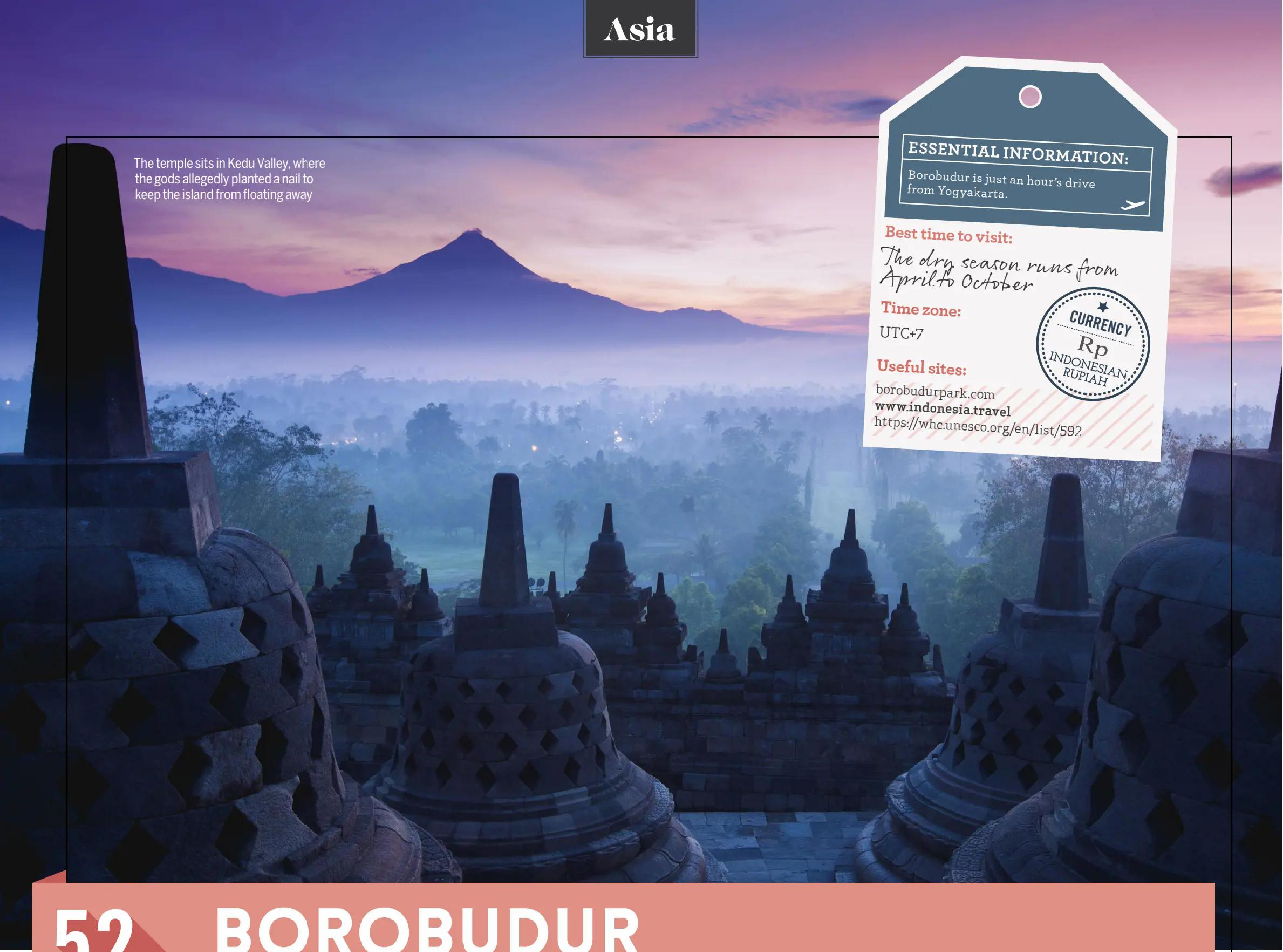
Cat Ba is the largest island in the region, with a population of 13,500. Nicknamed 'Jurassic Park Island', it is a treasure trove of natural delights; boasting luscious mangroves, sandy beaches, swamp forests, freshwater lakes, lagoons, coral reefs and more. As such, it makes for a stunning alternative to the standard cruise, with many choosing to stay here for multiple days instead.

Half of the island is a protected national park, home to more than 1,000 types of plant, 70 breeds of bird and 32 species of mammal; most notably the almost-extinct golden-headed langur, of which fewer than 70 exist. It makes for fertile hiking ground, with trails snaking 18 kilometres (11 miles) up the mountain – a summit from which the island stretches out like a green cloud of life. Elsewhere, unlike most caves on the luxury cruise route, Trung Trang requires an Indiana Jones approach; one of flashlights and caution. A ride back to town should be secured in advance, to avoid the middle-of-nowhere surge pricing.

A rather more outward-looking point, just a little outside Cat Ba town, is Cannon Fort – a viewing platform complete with Japanese-built tunnels and gun emplacements. Gazing at the serene Monkey Island, Ban Islet and the fishing boats and floating houses of Lan Ha Bay, it is hard to reconcile a country so peaceful with its troubled past. However, Hospital Cave provides a stern reminder in its 17-room, bomb-proof underground safe house and hospital built during the Vietnam War. Though utilitarian by design, the shelter even incorporated a large natural cavern, which doubled as a cinema.

With such abundant natural beauty, it is hard to say which isle is the jewel in Ha Long Bay's crown. It is a region so stunning, it takes days to process what you've seen. As the boat whispers back towards the port, back to reality, in the end the simplest explanation is sometimes the most fitting – emeralds, dragons and all.

Traditional junks are a favourite way to soak in the ethereal atmosphere



The temple sits in Kedu Valley, where the gods allegedly planted a nail to keep the island from floating away

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Borobudur is just an hour's drive from Yogyakarta.

Best time to visit:

The dry season runs from April to October

Time zone:

UTC+7

CURRENCY

Rp

INDONESIAN RUPIAH

Useful sites:

borobudurpark.com

www.indonesia.travel

https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/592

52

BOROBUDUR

Once abandoned, Indonesia's Buddhist temple of Borobudur is now a leading pilgrimage destination

Tucked within the heart of Java, the busiest of Indonesia's 17,500 islands, beneath the jungle overgrowth is one of the world's great archaeological marvels. It is a complex rooted in mystery, science and spirituality, built by a civilisation that believed in creating monuments befitting the loftiest of ideals. Stroll up the terraced mountain to be flooded with intricate carvings, depicting the toil of humans, the life of Buddha and the struggle to attain enlightenment.

This is Borobudur, an enormous temple built of 55 cubic metres (1,942 cubic feet) of volcanic stone, over a base of 123 square metres (1,324 square feet). A masterpiece of ancient design, it sits amidst the backdrop of central Java's Kedu Valley, near Mount Tidar, where the gods supposedly planted a nail to keep the island from floating away. The valley, nicknamed 'The Garden of Java' for its abundant fertility, is bookended by two volcanoes to the east, and two to the west – rising more than 3,000 metres (9,842 feet) high, bellowing smoke.

Built by the Shailendra dynasty in the 8th and 9th centuries, the colossal Borobudur is divided into three tiers; a stepped pyramid with five concentric square terraces and three concentric circles, topped with a stupa. The temple was rediscovered in 1815, having been abandoned and buried under volcanic ash for centuries. Alongside temples at Pawon and Mendut, it forms a straight line; a large temple compound, and a pilgrimage path.

The largest Buddhist temple in the world, it was built at the base of a hill, levelled into a plateau, rising 15 metres (49 feet) above the surrounding plain. From base to stupa, Borobudur is adorned with one of the world's largest arrays of Buddhist reliefs, totalling 2,672. Elsewhere, 504 statues were scattered around the complex, with 72 small stupas holding one each.

Together, the structure of Borobudur represents the Mahayana Buddhist view of the universe; which is believed to be divided into three spheres: one where we are bound by our desires, one where we cling to name and form, and a final one where we hold on to neither.

The first level features 160 reliefs depicting Kamadhatu, a world of crimes of desire, such as killing, torture and theft. Meanwhile the second, the realm of Rupadhatu, boasts 328 Buddhas, along with 2.5 kilometres (1.5 miles) of Sanskrit manuscripts and 1,212 decorative panels. Finally, the stupa represents Arupadhatu – the highest plane – its simplistic design echoing purity of form, or formlessness. In essence, this represents the journey towards nirvana, with the stepped pyramid simultaneously reflecting an ancient Indonesian symbol of ancestor worship.

The volcanic building material for the temple was collected from rivers, cut to shape, brought to the site and, incredibly, laid without any binding material. Instead, the stones were connected by dovetails in horizontal connections and indentations in vertical ones – giving the temple flex. It is perhaps this dynamic construction method that has helped the temple survive an assault of earthquakes, decay and even bombings.

Despite its troubled past, Borobudur has risen from the ashes; today, a pilgrimage site not just for Mahayana Buddhists, but for wide-eyed wanderers from all corners of the globe.

53

TAJ MAHAL

India's Taj Mahal is an architectural marvel, but beyond its beauty lies an intriguing love story

Legend has it that all the architects and labourers who worked on the Taj Mahal were killed or mutilated after its completion so that no other structure like it could ever be built – such is the magnitude of its beauty. Of course, historians have argued that there is no evidence to prove this is true, but it elevates its almost mythical status.

The Taj Mahal is not only a seventh wonder of the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site, but with more than seven million visitors it is one of the most-visited landmarks in the world – and with good reason. It took 22 years and 20,000 labourers to complete this masterpiece. It is said 1,000 elephants were needed to transport all of the materials for construction. And at 73 metres (240 feet) tall, the structure – built from translucent white marble and ornately decorated with semi-precious gems – is a sight to behold.

Located just outside of Agra in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the Taj Mahal stands on the bank of the River Yamuna and covers an area of 17 hectares. This includes the main gateway, gardens, mosque, rest house and mausoleum. The architecture is a blend of Persian, Islamic and Indian styles. But the most notable aspect of its design, other than its imposing stature, is the use of symmetry and repetition. The tomb is the main focus, and it has four identical sides. The building that houses this, famous for its spectacular dome, is framed by four minarets. And there is symmetry in all its surrounds, from the gardens and reflective pool, to the shapes and patterns carved into the walls.

As you walk through the main gateway, the Taj Mahal magically appears, and the hustle and bustle turns to calm as you become transfixed. The crowds can be overwhelming, but it's worth putting up with them as it is truly mesmerising walking up to it. The real beauty, however, is in the craftsmanship as you get up close: ornate geometric designs made out of pietra dura, and intricate flower sculptures carved into the marble; Persian poems and verses from the *Quran* etched into the walls.

If that wasn't magical enough, the architecture also encompasses optical illusions. The colour of the monument changes throughout the day: from white early in the morning, to shades of golden yellow and pink as the sun rises and sets, and a blue hue in the moonlight. Wake up early to visit at dawn, if not for the view then to avoid the crowds. And for a special visit, try a moonlight tour.

But despite the Taj Mahal's grandeur, it's the love story behind the monument and not its aesthetics that makes visitors flock to see it. After all, who wouldn't want to see the extent a man will go to in order to prove his love?

Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's wife, Mumtaz Mahal, died in 1631 giving birth to their 14th child. A year later, he commissioned the Taj Mahal in her memory. It is said the emperor was devastated by her death and promised to build her an eternal resting place, a symbol of their love. The name Taj Mahal is believed to be a shortened version of her name and translates as 'Crown of Palaces'. Whether you believe the love story or not, the Taj Mahal is definitely a jewel in India's crown.

The Taj Mahal is perfectly symmetrical apart from the emperor's tomb, which was added in at a later stage

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Agra is around 200 kilometres (124 miles) from Delhi, so day trips are possible.

Best time to visit:

November to February (to avoid hot weather and heavy rain)

CURRENCY

₹

INDIAN RUPEE

Time zone:

UTC+5:30

Useful sites:

asi.payumoney.com/
www.tajmahal.gov.in/guide.html
www.audiocompass.in

54 ANGKOR'S TEMPLES

With many having been rebuilt, Angkor's temples in Cambodia are monuments of human ambition

The city of Angkor, which was once the capital of the Khmer Empire – the predecessor to Cambodia – is well known for having dozens of enigmatic temples. In combination, they form a body of architectural work that is unsurpassed in its scale and detail, a beautiful mix of Hindu-Buddhist iconography and a true testament to the burning ambition of the Cambodian god-kings, who showed great determination to build increasingly more impressive structures in a bid to showcase their might.

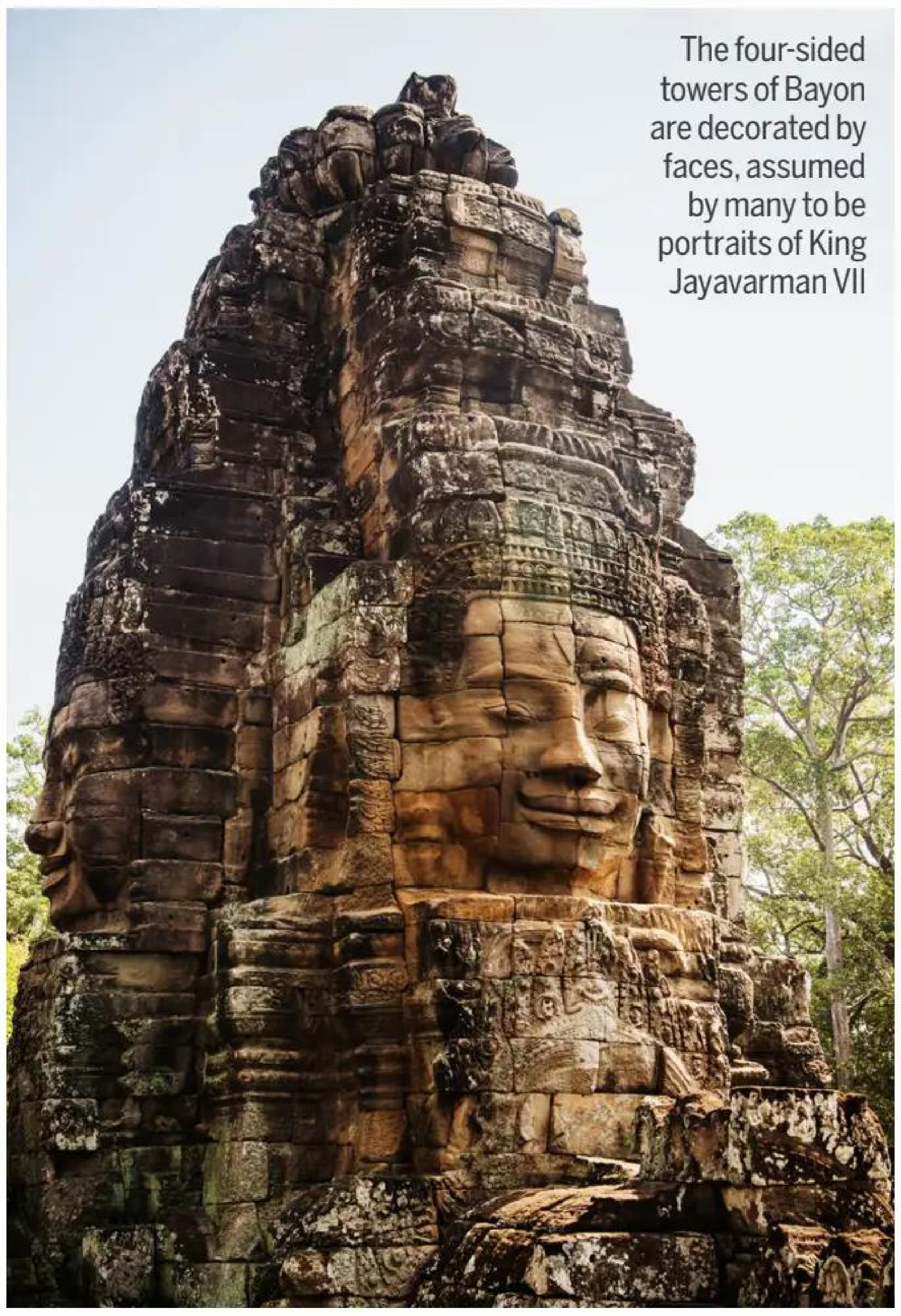
The largest of them all is Angkor Wat, a grand and meticulously preserved Hindu temple that positions itself as being at the centre of the universe, such is the weight of its significance. Built by Suryavarman II and dedicated to Vishnu in the early 12th century, its five towers can be seen from over a kilometre (half a mile) away, rising high into the sky as some kind of pointer to one of the world's largest religious monuments.

As a building, it represents Cambodia's heart and, situated about 225 kilometres (140 miles) northwest of the capital, Phnom Penh, this awe-inspiring complex has proven to be a survivor. It has been near-continuously used since it was built, and it has outlasted both the civilisation behind its construction and the destructive rampages of the Khmer Rouge. They caused the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s and blasted bullets into Angkor Wat's walls.

Reached by crossing a large, deep moat lined with serpent-topped balustrades and built to re-create the image of mythical Mount Meru's five peaks, you'll encounter a large statue of Vishnu, which has been produced from a solid sandstone block, at the west gate. You'll then make your way along a wide avenue to the three-storey temple complex and look to enter the tower – a feat that's more difficult than you'd imagine. It is accomplished via a steep set of stairs, deliberately created at an angle of nearly 70 per cent to remind visitors that a climb to heaven is difficult. As you grip at the side ropes for your ascent, the adventure presses home the belief that gods resided at the top of a temple. Once there, prepare to be amazed some more.

Angkor Wat is strewn with once-hidden paintings and decorative pillars but, most importantly and a major draw, there are bas-relief carvings to a height of close to two metres (6.56 feet) that stretch for a couple of kilometres (just over a mile) – a major undertaking and a good sense of the size. Spanning all four sides of the outer walls, they are incredibly detailed and remain so a thousand years after they were created, telling the tremendous story of the battles between the gods and demons.

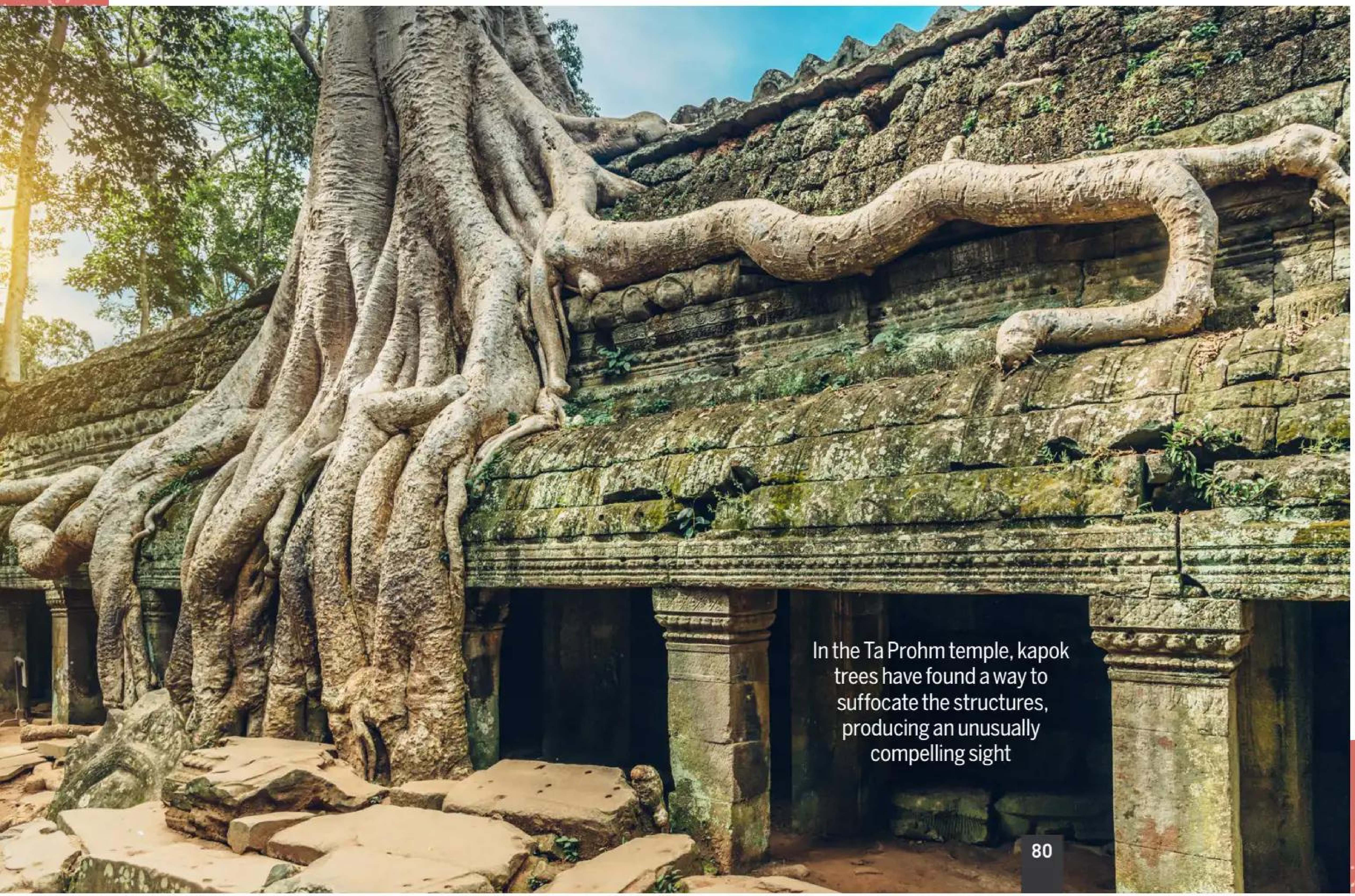
Venture away from Angkor Wat, and your jaw will drop even further. You should certainly head for the splendidly decorated Bayon, which takes pride of place in the last Khmer capital of Angkor Thom, where you'll see a staggering 200 or so enormous smiling stone faces beaming down on you from 54 towers. Created on the orders of King Jayavarman VII, it makes for a surreal state temple that, like Angkor Wat, incorporates a great many bas-reliefs. What makes it even more unusual is that it was dedicated to Buddha and built as a Mahayana Buddhist shrine. As the day goes on, shadows are cast over the faces, and it really has to be seen to be appreciated.


The four-sided towers of Bayon are decorated by faces, assumed by many to be portraits of King Jayavarman VII

You'll see a staggering 200 or so enormous smiling stone faces

So too does Banteay Srei, created from red sandstone on a small site in the 10th century and dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. It is located further away from the main group of temples, but it's worth venturing over for a look at the intricate and ornate carvings that it contains. Indeed, there is barely an inch that hasn't been filled with decoration, whether a leaf motif or a devata – a female deity. It is all the more remarkable given that a god-king did not commission this. Rather, it was the order of a royal family tutor, or Brahman, and the fact that something so elaborate could be produced by such a person shows great influence and importance.

Preah Khan, meanwhile, is entirely different. It was commissioned by a king – Jayavarman VII – in honour of his father, and yet the fascinating thing about it today is not that it fused together Buddhist and Hindu temples but that it has taken on a remarkable life of its own. Trees have grown into the temple and vegetation has enveloped


In the Ta Prohm temple, kapok trees have found a way to suffocate the structures, producing an unusually compelling sight

Pre Rup is a temple mountain that means 'turn the body', suggesting funerals were held there

the structures. But even that pales when you compare it to Ta Prohm, which – unlike most of the other temples that have been preserved and restored – has been left to nature.

To that end, Ta Prohm is perhaps the most fascinating of all, the roots of trees encasing the temple to such an extent that they are very much at one. It looks like something out of the mind of a fantasy-film director – a product of Tim Burton perhaps. But it's not. It's precisely what happens when a jungle encroaches and weighs heavy on what is now essentially a creaking structure. It's not very easy to get around, but this is much of the fun, exploring as you perhaps would had you come across it originally before other tourists learnt of its existence.

But that is the strength of the area: a chance to step back centuries and get into the mindsets of the ancients. In many ways, the smaller temples are more engaging – both Pre Rup and Banteay Samré are akin to miniature Angkor Wats with similar features and much to explore, only with the bonus of fewer visitors. Banteay Kdei is also away from the tourist trail, built in the Bayon architectural style and with more wonderful bas-reliefs to admire.

You should also find time for Phnom Bakheng, which pre-dates Angkor Wat and offers great views from its mountain vantage point. But whatever you choose to do, tackle them at your own pace and in a way that you don't become jaded or overwhelmed. By savouring the few that you decide upon, you'll unlock the magic of Angkor and come back refreshed and enthused with your stacks of awe-inspiring photos.

Angkor City

When the Angkor temples were discovered by Western explorers – notably Frenchman Henri Mouhot in 1858 – few people outside the immediate area in Cambodia had known of these monuments. But it became apparent that as many as a million people lived in the area, forming a huge city that, even today, we don't know the full extent of.

Although streets have been uncovered, discoveries continue. In 2016, for instance, archeologists from the University of Sydney took to the air in a helicopter and used remote sensing technology to map 958 square kilometres (370 square miles) around Angkor. By recoding variations in the smallest of details of the ground surface topography, waterways, highways and temples emerged.

It was rather remarkable, uncovering a significant lost city that once thrived and dominated for so many years. Suddenly, we learned of a sophisticated metropolis boasting wealth and technical know-how among its people – until climate change caused flooding, which sent the city into decline. Phnom Penh was the replacement.

Angkor Wat is one of the biggest religious buildings in the world

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Start sightseeing early so that you avoid the stifling midday heat.

Best time to visit:

November to March

Time zone:

UTC+7

CURRENCY

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CAMBODIAN RIEL

Useful sites:

www.tourismcambodia.com/attractions/angkor.htm
www.siemreap.net/visit/angkor
http://angkor.com.kh/

55 ZHANGJIAJIE NATIONAL FOREST PARK

This mountainous paradise in China is a feast for the eyes

A natural wonderland perfect for a fantasy-inspired getaway, Zhangjiajie National Forest Park is a jaw-droppingly stunning mountainous region with views to die for. Located in northwest Hunan in China, it was recognised as the country's first national forest park in 1982. Once you set eyes on it, you'll understand why, with its subtropical dreamscape filled with dense, lush forests; verdant valleys; beautiful streams; crystal-clear waterfalls, incredible rock formations; endless caves; steep cliffs; and towering, quartz-sandstone pillars that have not only filled the imaginations of Chinese painters over the centuries, but also inspired *Avatar's* Hallelujah Mountains. The most magnificent of them all is the 1,080-metre-high (3,543-foot-high) pillar called the Southern Sky Column.

Hike up to Huangshi Village early in the morning and you'll be face to face with the mythical stone pillars. Though the thousands of stone steps might be a bit of a slog, seeing the pillars rising slowly out of the rolling mists and fog is well worth the exercise! Take a cable car back down to the exit for an easy descent.

Then, head down below in the east of the park and you'll end up on the route of the Golden Whip Stream. Spanning 7.5 kilometres (4.6 miles), the Golden Whip Stream is also called 'the most beautiful valley of the world'. With its serene, quiet and winding waterway surrounded by waterfalls and cliffs, it's easy to see why.

Here, you can also be awed by the 3,000 plant species that make up the forest, which covers 98 per cent of the park. Or you can seek out the wild macaque monkeys, Chinese water deer, clouded leopard and critically endangered Chinese giant salamander – all of which call the park and the surrounding UNESCO heritage site, Wulingyuan Scenic Area, their home. There are plenty of other national forest parks nearby, such as Yangjiajie, where you can be engrossed in the Kingdom of Vines or study elegant white cranes; or Tianmen Mountain, which has an impressive keyhole cut in its side.

For those after an adrenalin hit, the Zhangjiajie Glass Bridge is 430 metres (1,410 feet) long, and six metres (20 feet) wide, and spans two mountains in the park. It has the highest bungee jump in the world, at 300 metres (984 feet) high! Brave the heights and you'll be treated to an amazing bird's-eye view of the canyon below. If that's too much excitement, the Bailong Elevator may be a better fit. At 326 metres (1,070 feet) high, this glass lift is the highest and heaviest outdoor lift in the world.

You can book a tour around the mountains to make it quicker to see all the sights, but if you go alone, a ticket to the park costs RMB¥248 (£27/$36) during peak season (1 March to 30 November) and is valid for three days.

Be sure to kit yourself in comfortable hiking gear and long-sleeved tops even in the summer, as it can be cooler in the park than in the rest of Zhangjiajie city (from which the park takes its name), thanks to the luscious vegetation in the forests that cover most of the area.

Though resembling karst, the pillars are actually made of quartz sandstone and formed via physical erosion

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
Wear good walking shoes for comfort.

Best time to visit:
April to October

Time zone:
UTC+8

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Useful sites:
www.topchinatravel.com
www.travelchinaguide.com
www.chinahighlights.com/zhangjiajie

If you do your research, you might be lucky enough to watch a huge Sikh celebration

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Remove your shoes and wash your feet in the pools as you enter the temple.

Best time to visit:

April, for Vaisakhi, the holiest Sikh festival

Time zone:

UTC+5:30

CURRENCY

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INDIAN RUPEE

Useful sites:

www.goldentempleamritsar.org
www.indianholiday.com/best-of-india/monuments/golden-temple.html
sacredsites.com/asia/india/golden_temple_amritsar.html

56

GOLDEN TEMPLE

Sikhism's holiest shrine, in India, welcomes visitors from all walks of life into its gilded archways

The glimmering Golden Temple in the Indian city of Amritsar stands on a platform, just above a pool of holy water, which reflects its fantastic image when still and calm. Millions of Sikhs have been visiting this site for centuries, as it is their holiest Gurdwara – a place for pilgrimage and religious reflection. But the famous Golden Temple itself is only one small part of a massive complex known as the Sri Harmandir Sahib – and it's well worth exploring in its entirety.

Sri Harmandir Sahib has seen wars, the establishment of empires and even the Partition of India. The temple has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times – a testament to how important the place is for Sikhs. It took its current form in the 19th century, when the Maharaja Ranjit Singh rebuilt the temple after founding the Sikh Empire. In 1830, he covered the central shrine in gold foil, giving it its iconic look.

Since that time, it has been at the heart of conflict between Sikhs and other religious groups, and as recently as the 1980s it was heavily damaged by the Indian Army (sent in by Indira Gandhi). But now, the Gurdwara is once again a place of peace and quiet within the lively city of Amritsar. Following one of Sikhism's major doctrines, the temple welcomes people from all faiths, ethnicities and classes.

Within its walls, you need to make sure that you cover your head and dress respectfully. The temple offers items for you to cover up with, but if you want to take something home with you, the market stalls outside its gates sell head coverings and shawls for a relatively low price. Orange is a religiously significant colour here, so that is one of the most common colours you will see people wearing.

When you pass through the entrance gate, you'll be greeted right away with the magnificent site of the Golden Temple. Before you head in that direction, though, a walk around the pool is a good idea – you can see some of the other buildings that make up the complex, such as the Akal Takht, where the central authority of modern Sikhism resides.

In the pool, you'll see men, women and children washing, as Sikhs believe this water has restorative powers. By the steps going down into the water, you might see devotees meditating. Then, as you make your way towards the Golden Temple itself, there will be a long line of people queuing to get in. The sanctum contains the original Sikh scripture, which is on display so people can worship by it. The temple is small and crowded inside, but absolutely stunning, with its ceiling covered in gold foil and precious stones.

At the end of your visit, stop by the community kitchen. In most Sikh temples, they serve a humble vegetarian meal free of charge, to any and all who cross the threshold. The Harmandir Sahib is no different, and serves thousands of people every day. It's nothing fancy – the principle is that everyone eats as equals – but it is tasty, and a good way to immerse yourself in Sikh traditions.

57

GREAT WALL OF CHINA

Witness the remarkable landmark that started out over 2,000 years ago

One of the most iconic sights in the entire world, a visit to the Great Wall of China constitutes the trip of a lifetime and it's located just an hour and half from Beijing – ideal for those who wish to escape the hustle and bustle of the city for a day trip.

The beginnings of the Great Wall began between the 8th and 5th centuries BCE, when different ancient Chinese states started to construct their own fortifications. This continued into the Warring States period until the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang of the Qin dynasty, connected the walls during the 3rd century BCE in order to prevent invasion from the north.

The Wall was then developed by the subsequent Han dynasty in order to protect the flourishing Silk Road trade, before the Ming dynasty incorporated watchtowers and fortresses into the Wall between the 14th and 17th centuries CE to create a stronger defence, while restoring the older parts of the Wall. Some parts have crumbled over the centuries, either due to natural causes or human destruction, and most of what you see today was built by the Ming dynasty.

The Wall was known as 'the longest cemetery on Earth' because of the number of workers who were killed during its construction. Stories emerged that their bodies were later buried in the Wall, although there is no evidence to suggest this is true.

Though the purpose of the Wall was to stop enemy invasions, it unfortunately failed to prevent them. The first Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, Genghis Khan, managed to breach the Wall to seize Northern China during the early 13th century. His grandson, Kublai Khan, completed the Mongol conquest of China when he defeated the Song dynasty in the South in 1279.

The Great Wall of China stretches across northern China and southern Mongolia, and is made up of many individual sections. The most popular sections for visitors are in Jinshanling in the east, Badaling in the west, and Mutianyu, which is close to Beijing. For a peaceful section, try Huanghuacheng. Many volunteer trips take place near Beijing.

The Great Wall is perfect for hikers, with recent estimates suggesting it is roughly 21,000 kilometres (13,048 miles) long. If you can't stomach the length, the Wall can be explored at any point. Depending on the part you wish to visit, you can reach it by bus, train or car.

If you're after an adrenaline rush, the Mutianyu section of the Wall, which can be reached via foot,

Ancient terracotta soldiers guard various sections of the Great Wall

The Mutianyu section has a toboggan slide that takes around five minutes to get you to the bottom of the Wall!

chairlift or gondola, has a toboggan slide that takes around five minutes to reach the bottom of the Wall. It is also a quieter section of the Wall, compared to Badaling, which is usually crammed full with tourists.

The Great Wall is also one of those dream sights that can be visited during any season, depending on whether you prefer summer or winter weather – although if you want clear skies, autumn is the way to go. Millions of visitors arrive every year to look at the Wall, which is considered to be one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. With a fascinating history, the Great Wall of China is not to be missed.

A stunning aerial View of the Great Wall

If you can't stomach the length, the Wall can be explored at any point

Preservation

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS OF THE GREAT WALL
One of the biggest and oldest independent organisations for the preservation of the Great Wall, it deals with the spread of information on the Wall's condition and projects to repair it. It works with China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage to help oversee the Wall's condition. Through WildWall, they run regular volunteer trips. Email william@wildwall.com or visit the WildWall Facebook page.

ABROAD CHINA
Abroad China's 'Clean the Great Wall of China' initiative is a conservation project that's looking for volunteers to help clean and rebuild sections of the iconic structure. As well as helping out in reconstruction efforts, there will also be opportunities to hike sections of the Wall. There will also be seminars with local experts on the history and cultural significance of the Wall. Visit www.abroadchina.net for more details.

BESPOKE TRIPS
Countless charities organise trips to the Great Wall of China, some of which involve helping with certain cleanup or restoration efforts. Keep in mind that these volunteer projects are usually quite expensive to take part in. Travel companies such as China Highlights (www.chinahighlights.com) also specialise in creating bespoke packages, including hiking both wild and restored areas of the Wall.

The Wall can be explored at any point, so you can travel to your preferred part by bus, train or car

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
Some parts of the Wall are very steep, so do your research before deciding which part you want to climb.

Best time to visit:
September to November)

Time zone:
UTC+8

Useful sites:
www.wildchina.com
whc.unesco.org/en/list/438
www.travelchinaguide.com

CURRENCY
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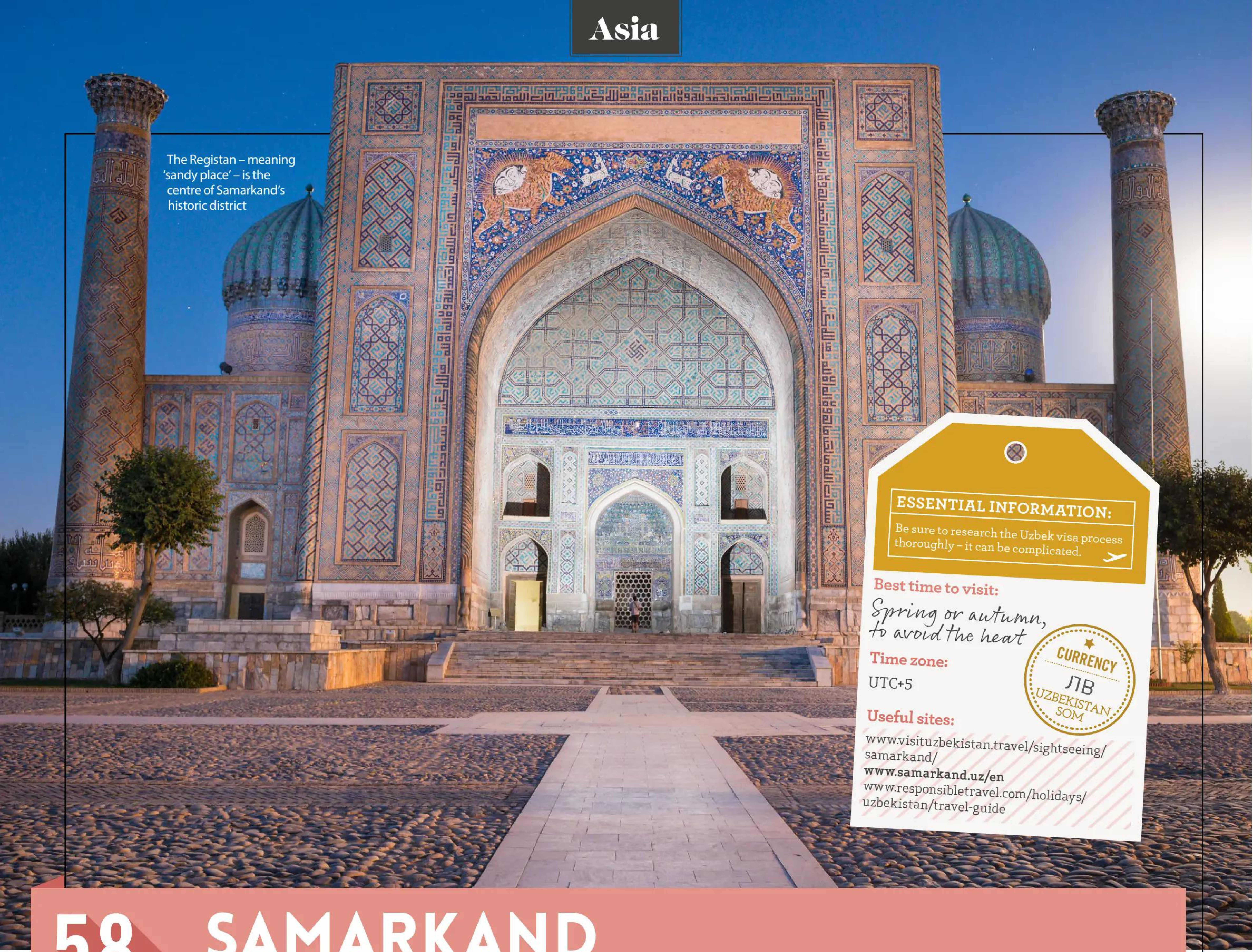
CHINESE RENMINBI



The Registan – meaning 'sandy place' – is the centre of Samarkand's historic district

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Be sure to research the Uzbek visa process thoroughly – it can be complicated.

Best time to visit:

Spring or autumn, to avoid the heat

Time zone:

UTC+5

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UZBEKISTAN SOM

Useful sites:

www.visituzbekistan.travel/sightseeing/samarkand/
www.samarkand.uz/en
www.responsibletravel.com/holidays/uzbekistan/travel-guide

58

SAMARKAND

Built deep in the deserts of Uzbekistan, Timur's regal city is a stunning turquoise gem

Samarkand's historic buildings are as beautiful as the Indian fabrics and Chinese silks that once flurried through there, on their long journey across the Silk Road. This city in Uzbekistan and in the middle of the barren steppes and deserts of Central Asia, was built on the back of Silk Road trading wealth – but it took the vision of one terrible emperor to turn it into the cultural jewel it is today.

Timur (the real-life inspiration for Marlowe's Tamburlaine) was a ruthless warlord from the Middle Ages, who had absolutely no problem slaughtering anyone unlucky enough to be in his way. But he was also a man with lofty aspirations, and dreamed of turning the city of Samarkand into a new centre for Islamic learning and culture. By forcing great intellectuals and craftspeople to live in the city, he succeeded – travellers who came to Timur's Samarkand marvelled at how it exceeded anything they had ever seen before.

Now you can, too. Uzbekistan was once a place shrouded in mystery, so far behind the Iron Curtain that it was almost impenetrable. But since the dissolution of the USSR and the death of its harsh former president, Islam Karimov, the country is now able to slowly reveal its treasures to the world.

And what treasures they are. The centrepiece of Samarkand is the almighty Registan – meaning 'Sandy Place' – a public square surrounded by three stunning madrassas (Islamic schools/universities). Beneath the blue domes, golden ceilings and perfect patterned tiles, great men from all across the vast Timurid Empire came to study the *Quran*, as well as mathematics, literature, poetry and art. Explore them for yourself and come back when night falls, so you can see all their colours enhanced by an incredible light show.

But the terrifying Timur is never too far away. The Gur-e-Amir (Tomb of the King) is his final resting place, and it's said he placed a curse upon all those who dared to enter it. In the 1700s, a Persian warlord broke the slab of green jade that marked Timur's crypt when he tried to steal it. After that, he seemingly had an awful run of bad luck, with his son becoming gravely ill. The warlord returned the stone to Samarkand and apparently his son recovered. The stone still bears the cracks from this attempted robbery, but don't worry – you shouldn't be affected by the curse yourself, if you simply wish to stand in awe of this brutal emperor and his surprisingly beautiful tomb.

As well as the historic sights, any visitor to Samarkand should seek out an experience with Uzbekistan's unique culture. Look around a carpet factory and see highly skilled women at work, creating magnificent items with just their hands. Or sample some local food in one of Samarkand's many Uzbek restaurants – but be warned, it's not exactly suitable for vegetarians.

One of the best things about Samarkand right now is that it remains relatively undiscovered by tourists, but in order to marvel at this hidden gem all by yourself, you'll have to act quickly – the city's high-speed rail network is making it much easier for foreign visitors to travel to it. So what are you waiting for?

59

EDO CASTLE

Visit the home where the mighty Tokugawa Shoguns once lived in Japan

Edo Castle is an absolute must-see for anyone who wants to immerse themselves in one of Japan's most significantly historic attractions. It was built over five centuries ago, in 1457, by samurai, poet and military strategist Ota Dokan. From 1590, the castle became the residence of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate.

Following the Battle of Sekigahara, the shogunate would rule Japan for just over 260 years from 1603 to 1868, a period that subsequently became known as the Edo period. During this time, Edo Castle effectively became the political and military capital of Japan, and Ieyasu began renovations that turned it into the largest castle in the country.

The castle was also the location for the events that sparked the revenge of the famous Forty-seven ronin, after their master was forced to commit ritual suicide after assaulting a court official there. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Emperor Meiji renamed Edo as Tokyo, and turned it into the official capital of Japan. He also resided at the castle for two decades before relocating to the newly built Imperial Palace.

Today, Edo Castle lies at the centre of Tokyo as part of the Tokyo Imperial Palace, where it can be found in the East Gardens. Unfortunately, the majority of Edo Castle was badly damaged in separate fires in 1657 and 1873, and it has never been rebuilt to its former glory.

However, the stone foundation of the former castle tower still exists which, before the fire of 1657, was the tallest castle tower in Japanese history. Aside from the foundations, the castle's walls, moats, entrance gates and guardhouses still remain for visitors to see today, including the picturesque Fujimi Yagura, a watchtower dating back to the mid-17th century.

Granted, viewing the remains of a castle does not sound as breathtaking as seeing the beautiful Imperial Palace next door, but Edo Castle has a lot to offer – for example, climb to the top of the castle ruins if you want to get a panoramic view of the Imperial Gardens. The East Gardens are free to enter, and visitors can roam around and explore the grounds at their own pace without the restrictions of a guided tour.

Go early in the morning to guarantee spending a couple of hours surrounded by peace and tranquillity, away from the hustle and bustle of cosmopolitan Tokyo. Also located in the East Gardens is the Museum of the Imperial Collections, which opened in 1993 and holds more than 9,500 pieces of artwork belonging to the Imperial family. This is also free to enter.

There are three gates at Edo Castle that are open to the public: Ote-mon, Hirakawa-mon and Kitahanebaschi-mon. Ote-mon gate is considered to be the main entrance, with a short, five-minute walk from Otemachi Station, or a 15-minute walk from Tokyo Station. As for the other two gates, they are a short walk from Takebashi Station, so it is up to you which one to use, but whatever you do, do not miss out on seeing one of the capital's most scenic sites.

The ancient castle-style Fujimi-yagura guard tower building at Tokyo Imperial Palace

© Alamy

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

For guaranteed Wi-Fi access, it is best to rent a pocket Wi-Fi device.

Best time to visit:

March to May (for clear skies, little rainfall and a chance to glimpse the cherry blossoms)

Time zone:

UTC+9

CURRENCY

¥

JAPANESE YEN

Useful sites:

www.seejapan.co.uk
www.jnto.go.jp
www.japan-guide.com

The Gates of Hell is the size of an American football pitch

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

You must obtain a visa before travelling to Turkmenistan.

Best time to visit:

Spring or autumn

Time zone:

UTC+5

CURRENCY

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TURKMENISTAN MANAT

Useful sites:

caravanistan.com/visa/uzbekistan/letter-of-invitation-loi-visa-support

www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/turkmenistan

www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/_eng

60

THE GATES OF HELL

Experience underworld fire and brimstone in Turkmenistan before you shuffle off this mortal coil

On this occasion, the Kremlin hasn't denied responsibility for setting the world on fire, although the exact date when this Hadean pit was punched into the ground is still up for debate. Around 40 years ago (50, if you're a local Turkem geologist) during the Soviet occupation of modern Turkmenistan, the Russians were drilling at what they thought was the site of a large oil field near the village of Darvaza, when their rig, camp and a huge circumference of desert around it collapsed into a deep crater. While peering over the edge and considering whether this would be a good time to defect, a careless worker flicked a cigarette butt into the pit and ignited the flammable gases escaping from it. Of course, the Soviets said they did it on purpose to burn off any poisonous gases and thus prevent a natural disaster. Engineers thought it would take just a few days for the inferno to die down and yet here we are, nearly half a century later, writing about the single reason you might visit the middle of the Karakum Desert. Or Turkmenistan, for that matter.

The Gates of Hell is a 70-metre (230-foot) wide, 20-metre (66-foot) deep conflagration with livid orange flames that lick up the sides, and mud that boils out of its centre. Located 260 kilometres (162 miles) into a 349,648-square-kilometre (135,000-square-mile) desert with few landmarks, natural or otherwise, this incandescent orange hellmouth is hard to miss, especially at night. In 2013, Greek explorer George Kourounis descended into its 1,000-degree-Celsius (1,832-degree-Fahrenheit) depths by foot in a tinfoil suit, to collect extremophile bacteria that live on the bottom. But most people who visit simply like to stare into this glowing abyss, or fry some eggs in a pan using Mother Nature's largest natural gas hob. Truthfully, there isn't really much else you can do here, and that's only if the Turkmen authorities let you visit.

As 'one of the world's most repressive countries', according to Human Rights Watch, it's not as if you can just hop on a plane to Ashgabat tomorrow, then find a local bus to Darvaza. The country is only marginally less locked down after the former 'president for life' Saparmurat Niyazov died (the same head of state who erected a golden statue of himself that rotated with the Sun in the country's capital), and President Berdimuhamedow took over. Foreign journalists get treated like lepers; independent travellers are sent back home. The only way you get to visit the Gates of Hell is via a convoluted visa process months ahead of your trip, which stands a chance being rejected on a whim, and by signing up for one of the officially sanctioned tour groups.

But if we've learned anything about modern travellers, bragging rights to unusual and exclusive destinations trump your garden-variety road trips across Southeast Asia every time.

61

CHAND BAORI

Obscured from the beaten path is one of India's most staggering man-made wonders

Chand Baori not only harvested water but doubled as a recreational space

Driving towards the east of Rajasthan, tucked away in a village between Jaipur and Agra is one of India's most overlooked marvels.

One of the country's largest stepwells, Chand Baori is a masterpiece of symmetry – an enormous inverted pyramid, driven into the earth. Three of its four walls feature 3,500 dizzying steps, cascading nearly 20 metres (66 feet) down to the water. The fourth boasts an elaborate royal pavilion.

The Thar Desert of west Rajasthan, India's driest region, can be an unforgiving place. More than 90 per cent of the roughly 35 centimetres (14 inches) of annual rain falls during the brief monsoon season, leaving the state prone to drought. It was this problem that led 9th-century ruler Mihira Bhoja to build Chand Baori, an enormous funnel-shaped well, designed to collect and store rainwater.

Chand Baori is an exemplary demonstration of the origin of India's stepwells, inspired by the traditional ghat (steps and platforms established along river beds). Originating as pits of sandy soil, they eventually grew in sophistication and number, and were built in varying shapes and sizes, depending on land conditions.

Of the thousands that cropped up across India, Chand Baori was among the deepest and most spectacular. The inverted pyramid design highlights the sanctity of water in Hindu culture – reinforced by the erection of the nearby Harshat Mata Temple.

With temperatures up to six degrees cooler at the bottom, it was also a popular place to escape the brutal heat. Though neglected now, in the 10th century it was a spectacle to behold. The three-story royal pavilion featured masterfully crafted jharokha, hanging balconies and galleries, complete with religious carvings.

Inside, nobles would picnic with visiting guests, entertained by masterful musicians and dancing courtiers, with a stage for special performances. Outside, villagers collected water, bathed and gossiped. In the absence of rain, this stepwell made it possible to live in an otherwise inhospitable environment; to drink, to wash and to irrigate the crops.

It was customary to wash one's feet and hands in the well before visiting the Harshat Mata Temple. Here, locals paid tribute to its namesake, the goddess of happiness. Hoping a little of her brightness – or abha – would rub off on the whole village, they named it Abhanagri, the city of brightness; later Abhaneri. Unfortunately, it was razed by Mahmud Ghazni, the notorious destroyer of Hindu monuments.

Believing the multipurpose stepwells to be unhygienic, India's British colonial rulers replaced them with an irrigation system of their own. As a result, most have fallen into disrepair, many clogged with rubbish. However, with the country facing a serious water crisis, it is developing a deeper respect for its historic stepwells. Like Bruce Wayne's impassioned rise from the prison beneath Chand Baori in *The Dark Knight Rises*, perhaps one day this well, too, shall rise again.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Chand Baori is just a short detour off the Golden Triangle route between Delhi, Jaipur and Agra.

Best time to visit:

The weather is best between November and February

Time zone:

UTC+5:30

CURRENCY

₹

INDIAN RUPEE

Useful sites:

www.tourism.rajasthan.gov.in
www.chandbaori.org
www.januprivatetours.com

62 SI PHAN DON

Discover the 4,000 islands of the Mekong River in southern Laos, where time stands still

Drifting slowly down the muddy, brown Mekong River, it is easy to forget the world beyond. The 'rice bowl' of Asia, the Mekong breathes life into the otherwise landlocked nation of Laos. It brings with it not just fresh water, but an outstanding array of aquatic life, with more than 1,100 species of fish – second only to the Amazon River. The Irrawaddy dolphin, Mekong giant catfish and giant freshwater stingray all call these waters home.

One side of the riverbank is lined with wooden huts, the other rich foliage. In the distance, a Laotian fisherman stands atop his boat, casting his net. He pulls it out and pauses; water bursts softly from the river, as freshwater dolphins surface for air. Such is the pace of life in Si Phan Don, Laos' '4,000 Islands' – a dense archipelago of islands, mostly tiny and inhospitable in Champasak Province.

At Nakasang village, small ferries line up, preparing to set off for Muang Khong, the eastern town on Si Phan Don's largest island, Don Khong. On the other side, the coast of Don Khong reveals cosy clusters of stilted houses above the waterline, looming banana trees, wayward cows and waving fishermen.

With bags thrown in one of the island's many guesthouses, the best way to explore is by foot, tuk tuk, bicycle or motorbike. The island, 18 kilometres (11 miles) long and eight kilometres (five miles) wide, hosts around 20 villages. Those who do not sustain themselves from the river live off the land, with farms producing palm sugar, palm-leaf hats and lao khao – fermented rice whisky. Twice a day, sugar farmers in Ban Hin Siew Tai, the heart of Laos' sugar industry, scale their trees and collect juice to boil into sugar. Their produce makes its way to the local market at Ban Kang Don, where the fishermen hawk their hauls.

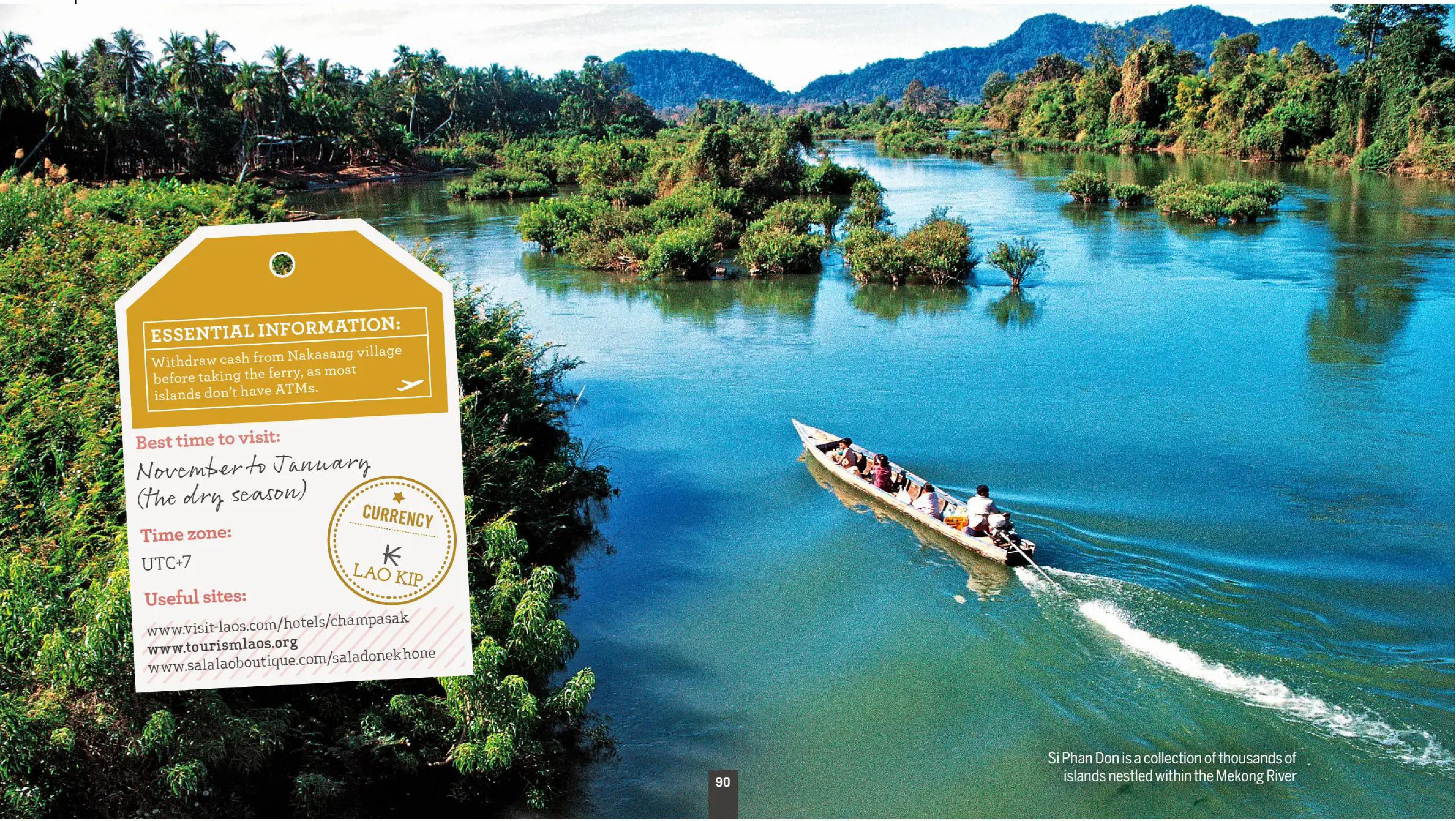
Among Don Khong's 100 mountain tops, there are many nooks and crannies to explore. Half a mile north of Muang Khong, just a short, shaded walk off the beaten track, via banana plantation, is Tham Phu Khiaw, or Green Mountain Cave. A humble collection of Buddhist iconography, many make regular pilgrimages to the sanctuary.

The island's oldest temple can be found in the Ban Xieng Wang community. A cycle through the bamboo groves and farms north of Muang Khong, Wat Jom Thong is marked by a triple-gated entrance. This opens up to a cruciform temple hall of brick and stucco, topped with tiled roof and woodwork engraved with beasts.

Among the 14 other temples on the island is Wat Phu Khao Kaew. The shrine provides a surreal juxtaposition to the unruly terrain, with a small red and gold stupa, alongside a large reclining Buddha. The temple is believed to have been built on holy ground, pre-Khmer ruins, atop the nest of a Naga river serpent.

Alongside the island's indigenous history, it also bears mementos of its French occupation. Don Khong History Museum occupies a two-storey former colonial building. The local governor who built it in 1935 lavished it with the name Sathanavoudthi, or 'Garden of Eden' – more commonly referred to by locals as 'Brick House'. Restored in 2010, it is now a tiny museum, with a small curation of musical instruments, antique furniture and photographs of the Don Khon railway.

> A fun hiking trail follows the old French railroad



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Withdraw cash from Nakasang village before taking the ferry, as most islands don't have ATMs.

Best time to visit:

November to January (the dry season)

Time zone:

UTC+7

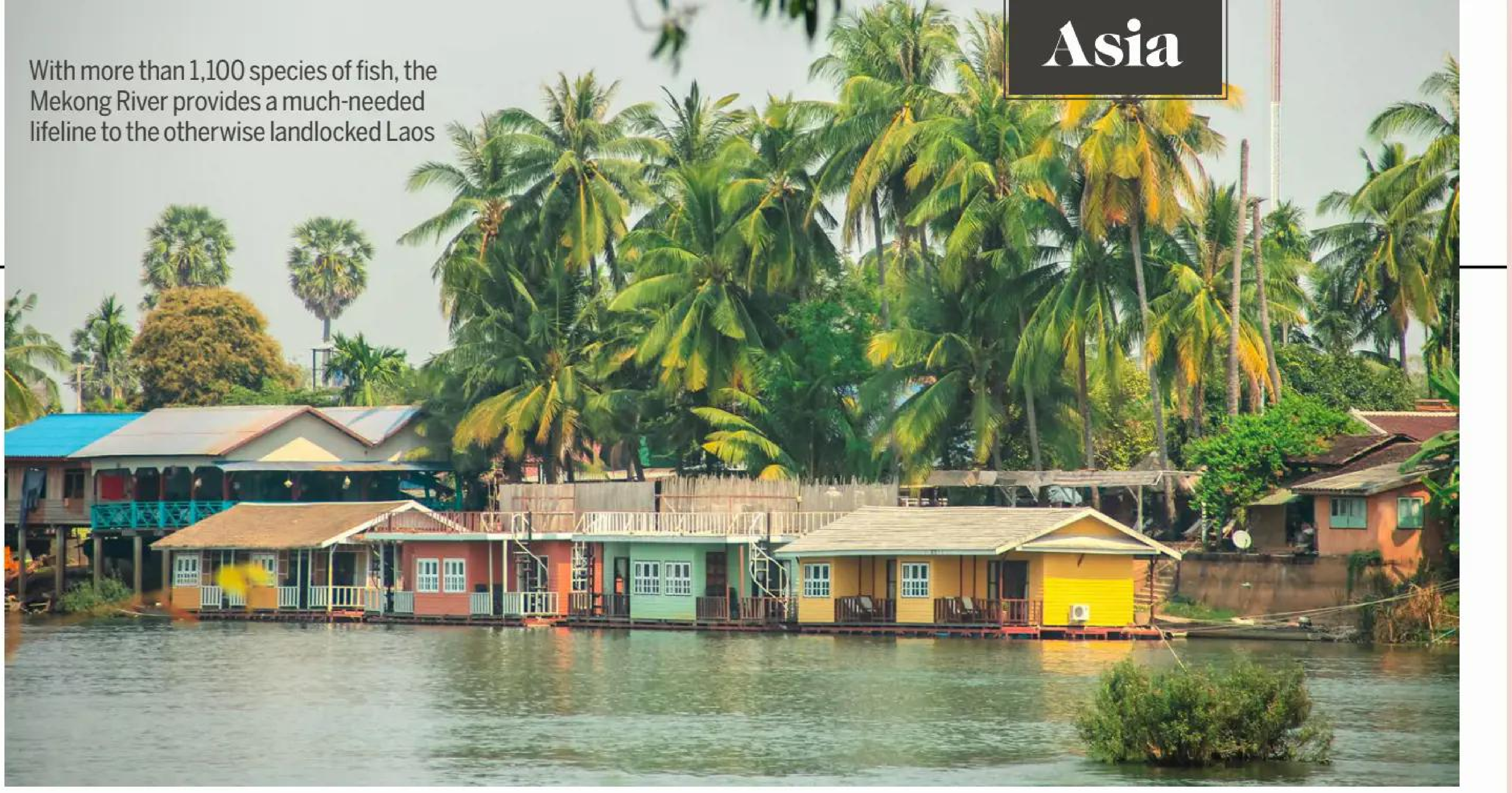
CURRENCY

₭ LAO KIP

Useful sites:

www.visit-laos.com/hotels/champasak
www.tourismlaos.org
www.salalaoboutique.com/saladonekhone

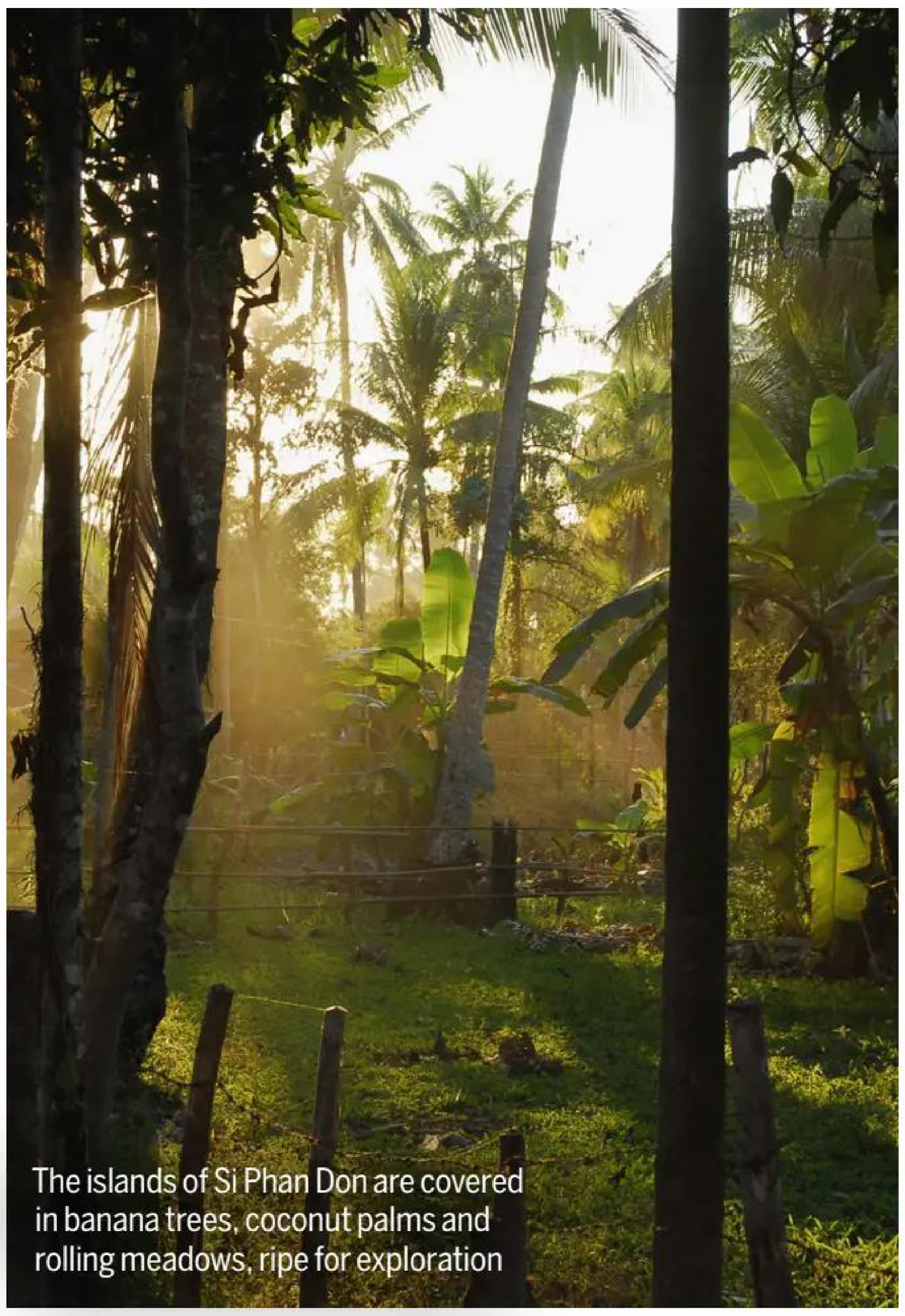
Si Phan Don is a collection of thousands of islands nestled within the Mekong River



With more than 1,100 species of fish, the Mekong River provides a much-needed lifeline to the otherwise landlocked Laos

Perhaps the most touristy of Si Phan Don's islands is Don Det, whose northwest bar district has earned itself 'party island' status. Though some sell hallucinogenic cocktails and snacks, it hardly rivals the debauchery of Vang Vieng, with most establishments shutting shop before midnight. Whether soaking in the sunset from the swaying embrace of a hammock, or throwing back rice at a family-run restaurant in the south, Don Det is the perfect place to slow down and switch off. Amidst the slumber, the island allows tired visitors to explore the Mekong River, in perhaps the laziest way possible: tubing. Alternatively, more adventurous types can battle the currents by kayak. There's plenty of shoreline to explore, and the western coast watches over some spectacular sunsets.

Ferries also set off from Don Det port to the nearby islands of Don Loppadi, Don Sang Pai and Don Phi Man. The journey there soaks in the ambience of the archipelago's stoic islands, uninhabited clusters of paradise, kept greedily from the outside world by the flowing Mekong. Cycling the three islands is an opportunity to immerse yourself in nature; to watch the sun dance over the flies, and the wind stroke past the paddy fields.



The islands of Si Phan Don are covered in banana trees, coconut palms and rolling meadows, ripe for exploration

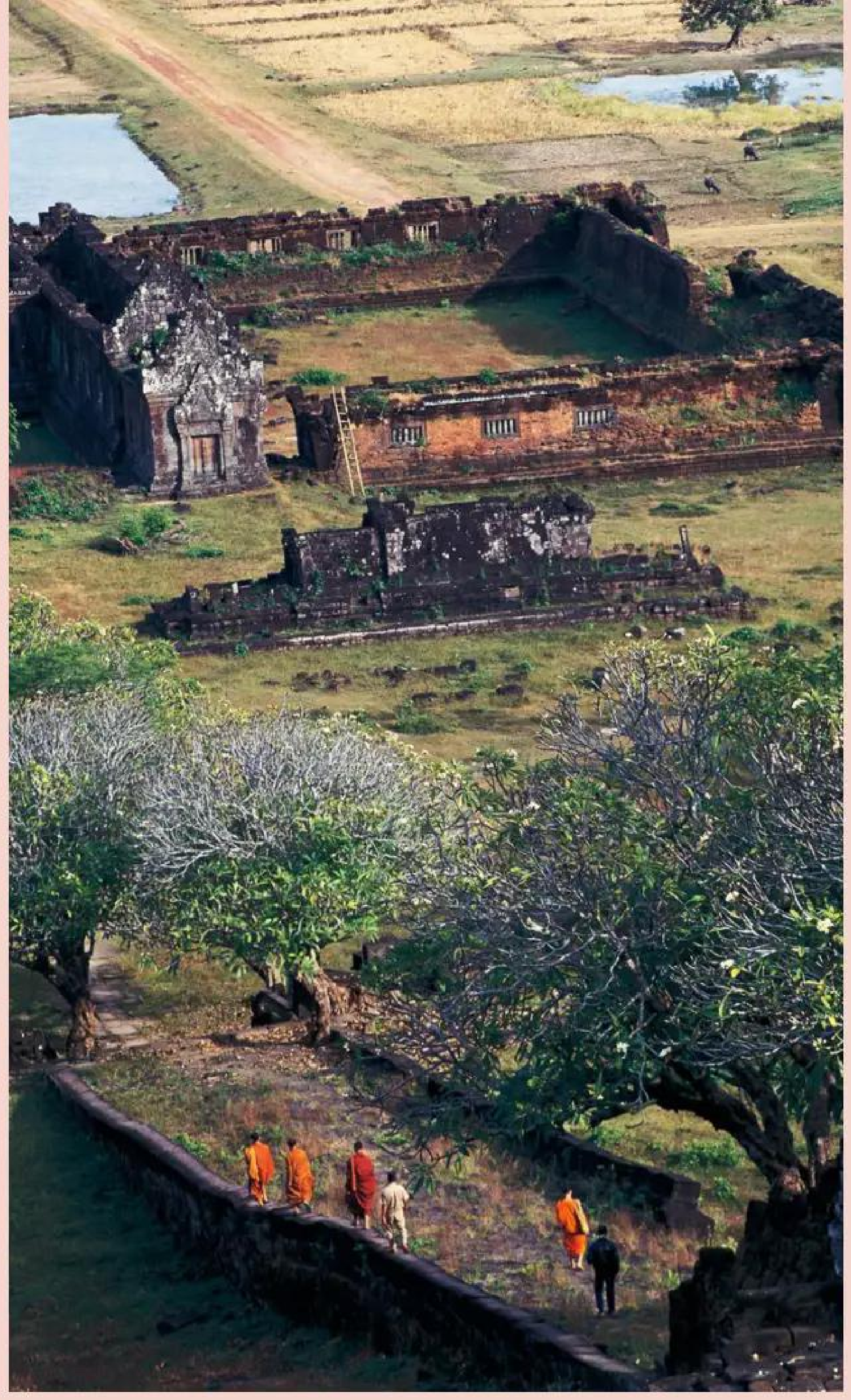
The last major island of Don Khon can be reached by foot, over the old French railway bridge linking it with Don Det. Just four kilometres (2.5 miles) long and 2.89 kilometres (1.8 miles) wide, the forested island is marked by its banyan trees and sandy beaches.

It is also home to Tat Somphamit, sometimes referred to as 'Li Phi' or 'Spirit Trap', a network of waterfalls and rapids the locals believe catch evil spirits. Undeterred, mortal fishermen mimic tightrope walkers, edging along bamboo scaffolds to collect their fish traps.

North of the falls is the island's colourfully painted Buddhist monastery, Wat Khon Tai. Built over an ancient Hindu site, it features a modern temple and steeple, alongside an old ordination hall, a crumbling stupa, with exposed red brick, and ancient stones – including an old Khmer shivalinga (abstract representation of Shiva).

A fun hiking trail follows the old French railroad, bookended by rusting trains, which was built in the 19th century to navigate supplies around the rapids from Don Khon to Don Det. The tracks have been replaced by roads, but placards across the island outline the history of the railway. At one point, the trail passes an overgrown Christian cemetery, and the tomb of a French family, who all died on the same day in 1922.

The local fishermen who frequent Xai Kong Nyai Beach are more than happy to take visitors to see the waterfalls, and even the dolphins, in their longtail boats. With the sun melting over the horizon, to the clicks and soft splashes of Irrawaddy dolphins, Si Phan Don feels like a world where time regresses back into an abstract concept – and the moment is all that matters.



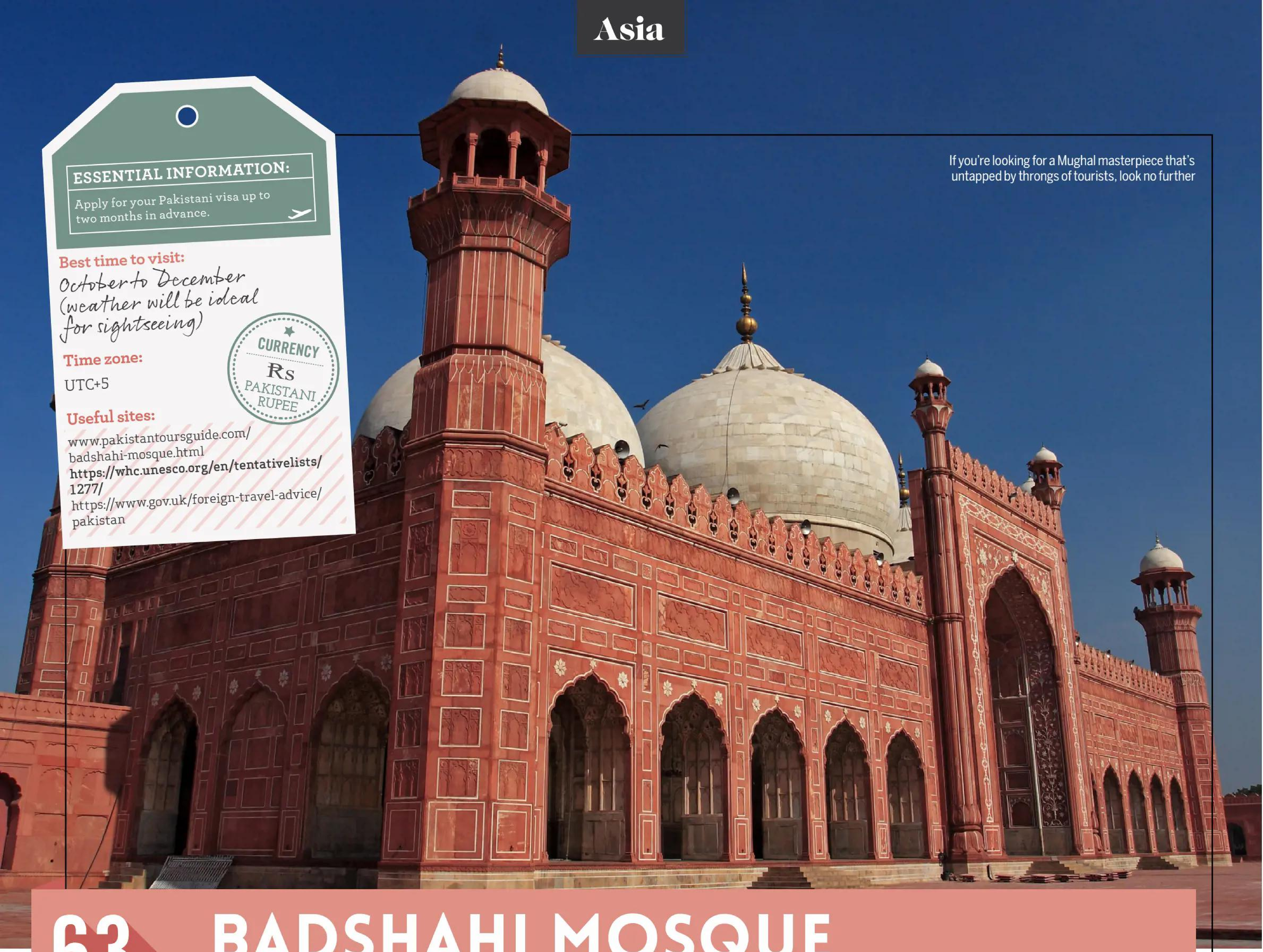
Pitstops

The best way to reach Si Phan Don is from Pakse International Airport, however no trip to the province is complete without a stop at Don Daeng, a short detour along the way. Just off Champasak village, Don Daeng is a perfect introduction to Laotian island life, with its towering palms, sleepy villages and rolling farms.

Across the river, the 1,000-year-old, UNESCO-protected Vat Phou temple complex sits at the base of a mountain. Preserving the architectural wonders of the Khmer Empire, the intricate development emphasises the Hindu relationship between human and nature; with temples, shrines and waterworks stretched in geometric patterns across ten kilometres (six miles) of mountain top and river bank.

The launching-off point for Si Phan Don is Nakasang village, which is just a short drive away from Khone Phapheng – the largest waterfall system in Southeast Asia. Here, daredevil fishermen tiptoe across precarious bamboo scaffolds, hopping alongside the waterfall. Visitors can watch from a safer distance from one of the park's various viewing platforms.

The launching-off point for Si Phan Don is Nakasang village. Small ferries line up here, preparing to set off for Muang Khong, the eastern town on Si Phan Don's largest island, Don Khong



If you're looking for a Mughal masterpiece that's untapped by throngs of tourists, look no further

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Apply for your Pakistani visa up to two months in advance.

Best time to visit:

October to December (weather will be ideal for sightseeing)

Time zone:

UTC+5

CURRENCY
Rs
PAKISTANI RUPEE

Useful sites:

www.pakistantoursguide.com/badshahi-mosque.html
https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1277/
https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/pakistan

63

BADSHAHI MOSQUE

On the edge of Lahore's thriving Walled City, you'll find the last great Mughal construction project

Lahore has long been considered the cultural capital of Punjab, the home of Mughal emperors, Sikh rulers and, later on, British colonisers. Now Pakistan's second city and historic hub, Lahore retains much of its grandeur, and the Badshahi (Emperor's) Mosque presides over it all. One of the world's biggest mosques, it's built from red sandstone and features four minarets that tower over the old city, three white marble onion domes, plus a vast square marking the entrance. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb built the place in the 1670s, in order to commemorate his military victories over a Hindu king further south. His project was strongly influenced by the Jama Masjid mosque in Delhi, built by his predecessor Shah Jahan – the man behind the world famous Taj Mahal.

After various invasions of Lahore, the mosque was used as an army garrison – first by the Sikhs, then by the British – yet it still fell into disrepair. But the mosque has been fully restored in the past 100 years, and it's become one of Pakistan's most prominent symbols.

While it's often overshadowed by its more tourist-friendly neighbour, India, there are plenty of reasons to visit Pakistan. Recently voted the best 'unspoilt' place for backpackers to visit by a number of prolific travel outlets, tourists are beginning to recognise the latent potential in this South Asian nation. Lahore is a fantastic starting point for your trip, as it is one of the safest areas in the region, and many of its residents welcome foreign tourists with open arms.

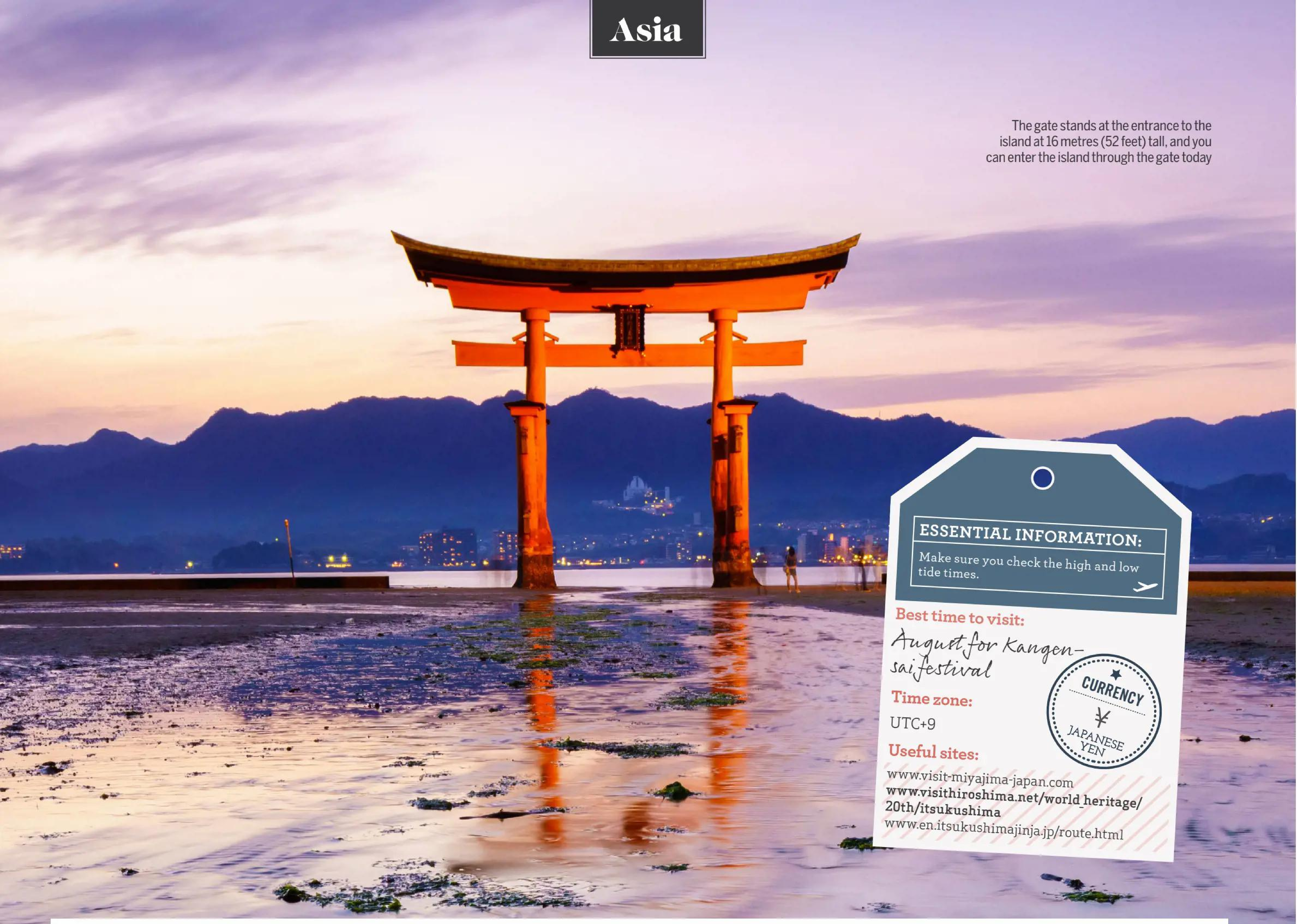
When you cross the Badshahi Mosque's threshold, you'll pass through a grand entrance gate, heavily influenced by Persian architecture. Walking through the courtyard (which can apparently hold up to 100,000 faithful), you'll notice it is bustling with Pakistani locals and domestic tourists. You might even find that some of the more curious local children ask to take selfies with you!

Proceed to the portico, where you can admire intricately decorated white marble – it's said to be some of the finest in the world. It's carved with endlessly climbing flowers, many of which are painted vividly in pink, green, red and orange. Take a note of the gilded chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, too. Everything is perfectly symmetrical – a hallmark of Mughal design.

The prayer hall can allegedly accommodate tens of thousands of worshippers, but is normally only accessible to male worshippers. It's particularly busy on Friday lunchtimes, as that's the time for jummah (Friday prayers).

If you can't get enough Mughal architecture, you're in luck. In the Hazuri Bagh garden – a place where the emperor would watch his army parade around – is an ornate pavilion, bright blue fountains, and plenty of green, grassy spaces. You'll also find the tomb of poet Allama Iqbal, one of Pakistan's most definitive writers.

For the best view of the mosque, get a rooftop table in Lahore's famous 'food street' and enjoy a hearty Pakistani meal while watching the sun go down over the domes and minarets. The mosque, along with the neighbouring Lahore Fort, is beautifully lit up at night, and makes for a truly stunning evening vista.



The gate stands at the entrance to the island at 16 metres (52 feet) tall, and you can enter the island through the gate today

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Make sure you check the high and low tide times.

Best time to visit:

August for Kangen-sai festival

Time zone:

UTC+9

CURRENCY

¥

JAPANESE YEN

Useful sites:

www.visit-miyajima-japan.com
www.visithiroshima.net/world_heritage/20th/itsukushima
www.en.itsukushimajinja.jp/route.html

64

ITSUKUSHIMA SHRINE

A stunning Japanese shrine between the mountains and sea of mortals

This 16-metre-tall (52-foot-tall) gate floating over Seto Inland Sea is steeped in history. Known as one of the 'three views of Japan', along with the pine islands of Matsushima and the sandbars of Amanohashidate, it marks the entrance of Itsukushima Shrine.

A tranquil place, Itsukushima is also known as Miyajima or 'shrine island', where 'people and gods live together', and is most famous for its eponymous Shinto buildings. The island was worshipped as a goddess, and the first shrines were built around 568 CE, but it wasn't until 1,168 CE in the Heian era that the historic Itsukushima Shrine was built by military leader Taira no Kiyomori. But still, the island was so sacred that shrines were separated from the land so as not to spoil the sacred ground. That's why the entrance torii gate, with its bold red colours were built offshore, on the sea. It is said that the rising and falling tides would help prevent the gods from damage during construction. During the 12th century, dedicated travellers from all over Japan would travel to the island by water, sailors carefully needling their vessel through the torii from Seto Inland Sea. We can only imagine the wonder they faced, encountering the shrine for the first time. Today, you can re-create their journeys by taking wonderful boat tours going through the towering torii gate at high tide, and get the same fantastic views of the island from the sea from March to November. It's customary when going through the torii to pray as you enter the gate by standing straight, bowing twice at 90-degree angles, clapping your hands at chest level twice, and finishing with a single final bow.

If you happen to arrive at low tide, though, don't despair! You can still get up close and personal with the gate by walking up to those magnificent pillars. You'll also notice a sight that is unique to low tide: three 'mirror ponds' or kagami-ike that seem to magically appear in the sand around the shrine. It's a truly marvellous sight that has inspired countless Japanese tanka and haiku poems.

Of course, Itsukushima Shrine is just as enchanting with its intricate and graceful Shinden-style architecture – the very same regal designs that are also used in the construction of the Imperial Palace in Kyoto. There's a delightful Noh stage, the only one in the country to rest upon the sea, stone lanterns that surround the entire island, roaming deer and two corridors that encompass the main building. The East Corridor is a beautiful vermillion, reminiscent of the torii floating outside. Its 108 ma (a Japanese word for the negative spaces in between each post) is a key feature of the minimalist architecture. The West Corridor, on the other hand, has an elaborate yet elegant Chinese gable roof called a 'kara-hafu'. Located right in the middle is a structure thatched with cypress bark and gentle curving eaves – the Main Shrine. The three Munakata goddesses are enshrined here, inside the main hall, or honden, protecting travellers across the sea and providing bountiful harvests for fishermen.

65

GILI ISLANDS

With no cars or motorised vehicles at all, these Indonesian islands are a retro paradise

Overlooked by the volatile gaze of Mount Rinjani, these three tiny islands off the coast of Lombok (an island which is, in turn, next to Bali – one of Indonesia's most visited places) might not look like much standing from the shore, but they're a hidden gem on the well-trodden South East Asia backpacker path. With stunning tropical beaches, it's your very own desert-island paradise. But go there before their full potential is truly unlocked – there's only so much space for those hunting for heaven on these little islands!

Sadly, a devastating earthquake hit nearby Lombok in August 2018, and the Gili Islands' tourism industry has been badly hit – some of the resorts were destroyed altogether, yet others escaped with minimal damage. As the locals continue to rebuild their homes and businesses, they're keen for tourists to flock back to these beautiful little islands so they can regain their primary source of income.

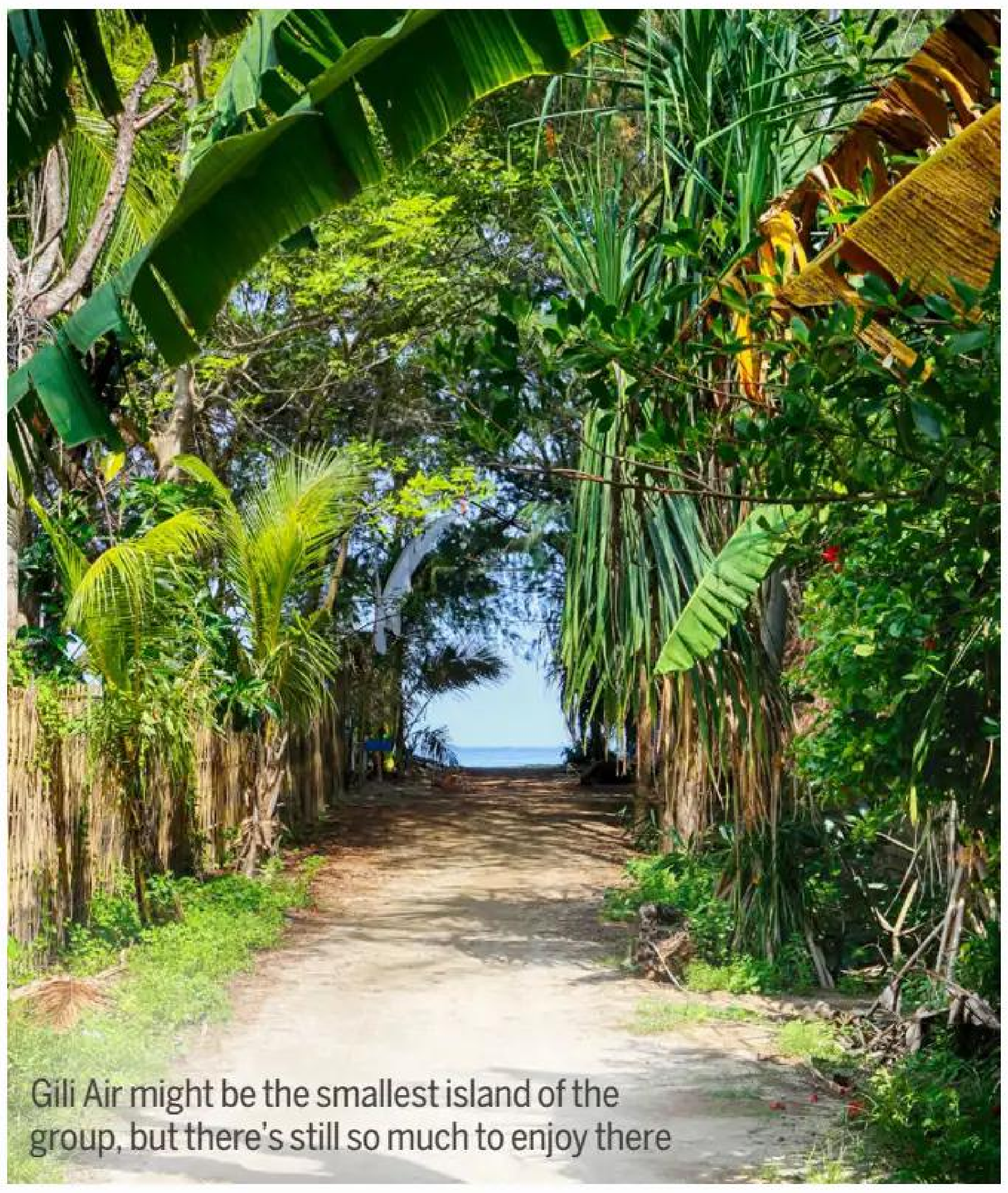
So, anyone in search of perfect white sand, flat shores and turquoise blue waters need look no further. But to get there, you can't just fly in – there's not even enough space for an airport. You'll need to take a boat from Bali or Lombok (Bangsal Harbour), then you can whizz between the three islands (Gili Trawangan, Gili Meno and Gili Air) at your leisure. There aren't any cars on the islands, either – just electric bikes, horse-drawn carriages known locally as Cidomo (which have been criticised by animal rights activists), and bicycles to get around with. You can actually walk to most places you need to get to on the islands. Getting away from cars and motorbikes is a rare opportunity in today's increasingly modern world, so you might find the stillness that fills the air rather relaxing.

Though the islands are incredibly close to each other, they all offer something different, so you should decide which one best fits your needs before arranging your trip. The largest island of the group is Gili Trawangan (known affectionately as 'Gili T'), and if you've come to Indonesia to party, then this is the hotspot for you.

Gili T was 'discovered' by backpackers in the 1980s, and it hasn't been lonely since. Easily the largest and most developed island, there are some big hotels and resorts here, as well as delicious places to eat out – and of course, plenty of places to dance the night away. You can even take a ride on party boats with guest DJs, or try the classic backpacker all-nighter experience with a 'full moon' party on the beach.

Sandwiched between Gili Trawangan and Gili Air (the island closest to Lombok) lies the chilled-out paradise of Gili Meno. It appeals mostly to couples and honeymooners, and its beaches are arguably the best of the three islands. In fact, the beaches on the east of the island are almost

You might find the stillness that fills the air rather relaxing



Gili Air might be the smallest island of the group, but there's still so much to enjoy there

Gili Meno has some of the best beaches in all of Indonesia

Meno's turtle sanctuary

Some of the Gili Islands' most famous residents aren't human, but turtles. These swimmers with shells grace the reefs around the islands, and some are even accustomed to seeing humans – but be careful not to touch them, as they are under threat in the wild. If you really want to see them up close, you may want to visit the Turtle Hatchery on Meno.

The hatchery was set up by local turtle lover Pak Boulong, whose concern for the declining number of turtles on the islands convinced him to take matters into his own hands. He has been criticised by some, who say the hatchery does not raise the turtles in the correct conditions, or feed them the proper food. He relies entirely on visitors' donations to continue his work.

Turtle eggs are collected by locals from the beaches, where they are naturally found. They are then incubated, and the turtle babies are kept at the sanctuary for eight months, when they are released back into the wild again – and if you're there at the right time, you'll be able to watch.

empty, so it's perfect for finding that serene seclusion you've been looking for on your jam-packed trip.

Relaxed and with a quiet atmosphere, you'll find plenty of comfortable beach bungalows to retreat to on Meno. When the sun goes down and you feel peckish, head to a seafood barbeque in the evening to try out the local fare – most restaurants set them up every night.

If Gili T sounds too noisy and Meno too quiet, the third island – Gili Air – will meet you in the middle. It's got a reputation for being the place where sociable backpackers come to meet each other and enjoy the islands without going too crazy. You'll find a variety of fun daytime activities, from Indonesian cooking classes to yoga classes by the sea; you can learn a new skill while hanging out with fellow travellers. Gili Air also has a spa, where you can put your head down on a towel and pamper yourself with a selection of Western and Asian massage therapies.

While each offers something different, all three islands have one thing in common: the huge variety of awesome dive sites in the shallow seas that surround them. As well as naturally clear waters that are great for snorkelling, a little further out you'll find some seriously fascinating reefs, sunken piers, and even World War II shipwrecks to explore.

The best thing is, the Gili Islands are renowned for being some of the cheapest places to learn to scuba dive anywhere in the world. If you're concerned about safety, there are a number of reputable places on Gili Trawangan that will teach you everything you need to know to dive without incident. Once you're under the water, you can spot colourful coral fish, turtles and plenty of other sea life in the depths.

After your hectic day of sunbathing, scuba diving and sightseeing, and just before the night ahead of you (however you choose to spend it), you should steal a moment to find a picturesque spot and take in the sunset. For a truly spectacular outlook, get a place with a view of the volcano Mount Rinjani, and grab yourself a cocktail from a nearby beach bar. The incredible sight of the sun setting over the volcano will take your breath away – and with no vehicles to pollute your eyes or ears, you can completely immerse yourself in nature's wonders.

The sunrise and sunset over Lombok is breathtaking and almost completely unspoilt by pollution

Gili Trawangan is famous for its nightlife and party scene

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Book your accommodation in advance, or it may be full up.

Best time to visit:

May to September (the dry season)

Time zone:

UTC+8

CURRENCY
Rp
INDONESIAN RUPIAH

Useful sites:

www.gili-paradise.com
www.gilibookings.com/travel-tips
www.indonesia.travel/uk/en/home

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90 LAKE TITICACA
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91 MACHU PICCHU
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ERICAS

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Travelling by bus is a convenient and cheap way to get around the region.

Best time to visit:

June to October (routes are less likely to be closed off due to snow)

Time zone:

UTC-8

CURRENCY

$

US DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.summitpost.org/mount-whitney/150227

visitinglaketahoe.com/

www.visitcalifornia.com/region/discover-high-sierra

SIERRA

Marvel at the sights of the USA's vast Sierra Nevada and all it has to offer

California has so much more to offer than just great beaches. The Sierra Nevada mountain range, otherwise known as the High Sierra, extends between the state's Central Valley and the Great Basin in the neighbouring state of Nevada, and is home to a collection of amazing destinations that are a must-see on every traveller's list. The region is well known in the US for its natural beauty and the diverse yet breathtaking backdrop each area has to offer.

The northernmost part of the region is the crowning glory of the Sierra Nevada trail and is home to the largest alpine lake in North America, Lake Tahoe. The amazing weather makes it a great destination to visit all year round, and with lots of ski resorts, multiple rugged terrains, and beautiful open plains of water such as Emerald Bay, shaded by the surrounding mountainous peaks. Here the sun is constantly shining (on average 300 days a year) making it a water-sport hotspot in the summer months with the beautiful Zephyr Cove nearby. However, the winter weather makes it the perfect destination for skiing and snowboarding, as snow covers the mountainous regions. Heavenly, the most famous of all Tahoe's mountains, features the longest run and the biggest vertical drop around. To ensure that you get the sun on you all day, ski on the Nevada side in the morning, moving to the California side in the afternoon.

As well as multiple lush forests, bustling wildlife, and iced granite domes, California's western Sierra is also home to two of the state's three renowned National Parks, making it the perfect place for nature lovers to visit. The western region of the Sierra Nevada trail has so much more to offer than natural beauty in the form of cultural heritage – it was once the homelands of the earliest Native American inhabitants and Gold Rush Pioneers. The best time to visit western Sierra Nevada is in the autumn, when festivals and nature combine to make for a

As terrifying as Death Valley sounds, it is actually a beautifully diverse backdrop in eastern California

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Yosemite Valley

A glittering glacial jewel in the crowning glory that is the Yosemite National Park, Yosemite Valley is one of the greatest features along the Sierra Nevada route. Although the valley accounts for only one per cent of the National Park in which it is housed, it is a well-known beauty spot for tourists and hikers alike. At 12 kilometres (7.5 miles) long, and 914 to 1,067 metres (3,000 to 3,500 feet) deep, its high granite summits such as El Capitan and Half Dome stand proud among the dense pine forest surrounding its landscape.

The valley is drained by the Merced River as well as the multiple other streams and waterfalls that flow into it. Yosemite Falls is the highest waterfall in North America, and is a big attraction and well worth a visit in the spring when the water flow is at its peak. For the most part, visitors typically choose to enter the valley from the roads to the west in order to pass through the famous Tunnel View entrance. With both hiking trail loops that stay within the valley, and trailheads that lead to higher elevations, all aspects of the valley can afford glimpses of the park's many unforgettable scenic wonders.

NEVADA

wonderful time. Kicking off the festive spirit is the annual 49er Festival and Chili/Salsa cook-off in mid September. The festival finale is the family friendly Oakhurst Fall Festival in October. In between all the fun it comes highly recommended that you trek down to the Yosemite and Sequoia National parks to feast your eyes on the colourful foliage and wildlife inhabiting the conservations.

With the Sierra National Forest on the southeast and Stanislaus National Forest on the northwest, the Yosemite National Park is in the heart of western California. Multiple trails lead you up to breathtaking views. It's known to be one of the largest and least fragmented habitat blocks in the Sierra Nevada, and home to at least 20 per cent of California's 7,000 plant species. Its peaks have an elevation range from 648 to 3,997 metres (2,127 to 13,114 feet), making it a popular area for trekkers and nature lovers. Meanwhile, less than 48 kilometres (30 miles) from Yosemite's eastern entrance, Hot Creek in Mono County is a virtually unknown district with thermal features that make it the Yellowstone of the High Sierra desert. The creek is within the Long Valley Caldera and is a 32-kilometre-wide (20-mile-wide) valley, which is the result of a collapsed volcano more than 700,000 years ago. The warm, geothermal waters of Hot Creek have paved the way through the caldera, and offer expansive views of the eastern slope of the Sierras.

A three-hour drive away, Sequoia National Forest is the home of giant sequoia trees, which populate 38 distinct groves within the boundaries of the forest. The Giant Sequoia National Monument, covering 328,315 acres, in the national forest has two amazing highlights: the lands northeast of Grant Grove and the Big Meadows/Jennie Lakes area where, if you take the Kings Canyon Scenic Byway east from Grant's Grove, you will pass the Converse Basin Grove, which was once reputed to be the largest sequoia grove in the Sierra region.

In and among the low-elevation foothills of the Sequoia National Forest, where summers are hot and dry, and winters are mild, you may spot one of numerous native species that inhabit

Nature takes its course down in Mono Lake where limestone structures have been weathered into weird and wonderful shapes

Nature has formed its own playground within Mono Lake

the area, from the grey fox, bobcat and spotted skunks, to the black bear, California quail wood rat and western whiptail lizard. Just beyond the boundaries of the Sequoia National Forest, on the Nevada border, lies the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest where many of the trees planted are more than 2,000 years old. The Methuselah tree in Schulman Grove, one of 37 pine tree groves in the forest, is estimated to be more than 4,850 years old, making it as old as the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. Meanwhile, only in Kings Canyon National Park which is adjacent to the Sequoia's National Park, will you discover what was declared by President Calvin Coolidge (in 1926) the nation's official Christmas tree – the General Grant Tree. The centrepiece of Grant Grove, it stands 81.5 metres (267 feet) tall and 8.8 metres (29 feet) wide, and is a fine specimen of the giant sequoia. It was named after General Ulysses S Grant in 1867, two years before he became the 18th president of the United States.

The eastern Sierra stretches from Lone Pine in the south to the Nevada line in the north, and contains many of the Sierra's most awe-inspiring settings. The highest point of the Sierra Nevada trail, Mount Whitney, also lies in northern California. Its daring 4,421-metre (14,505-foot) summit takes dedication to conquer, but rewards its champions with stunning views that expand across the state of California and Nevada. From the highest mountain in the lower US, Mount Whitney, to the eastern entrance to Yosemite National Park, the eastern region of the Sierra Nevada is beautiful. As well as two hugely popular ski areas, the hauntingly beautiful Mono Lake, less than six kilometres (four miles) north of the Mono-Inyo Craters, is a must-see for visitors.

Located next to the Pigeon Flat Campground about 7.2 kilometres (4.5 miles) west of Kennedy Meadows, the trail is roughly a quarter-mile walk to reach the unusual geologic formation. The rock formations you will find there, known as the Columns of the Giants, are nature's strange basalt rock sculptures that over time have been weathered into unique and intriguing shapes. Mono Lake is not only home to the basalt column, but is also a favoured area for rock climbers in North America. Although the origins of the lake are not yet well understood, it was created hundreds of thousands of years ago when the basin in which it lies was brimming with rain and glacial melt. It had no outlet to the sea and therefore the brimming volume of salty water was trapped. Somehow, even though the lake is naturally salty because of the geology of the area, its saltiness increases with every passing year. In the early 1900s, natural tributaries were diverted in to supply the nearby city of Los Angeles with fresh water. Mono Lake has been evaporating ever since, leaving higher levels of salt in its wake. As the water level dropped, white limestone towers known as tufa became exposed over the water line. Over the years, nature has formed its own playground within Mono Lake and placed these natural sculptures on show for everyone to see. However, due to increasing levels of tourism, the area is likely to be worn down, so be sure to visit while it is still thriving.

The world-class resort of Mammoth Lakes, featuring Rainbow Falls, is also on the vast Sierra Nevada route, as is Bodie State Historic Park. Within the park are the Bodie Hills and, best of all, Bodie Ghost Town. The area is the largest and best-preserved ghost town in the county. At its peak in the 1870s, as many as 8,500 people lived there. It was a favoured place to reside by those who were looking to get rich quick from nearby gold and silver deposits. However, after a decade the prosperity of the region dried up, and by 1886 the population had massively declined, leaving only 1,500 residents as the other several thousand inhabitants moved on to other locations looking to find their fortune and live out the American Dream. By the early 1900s, the

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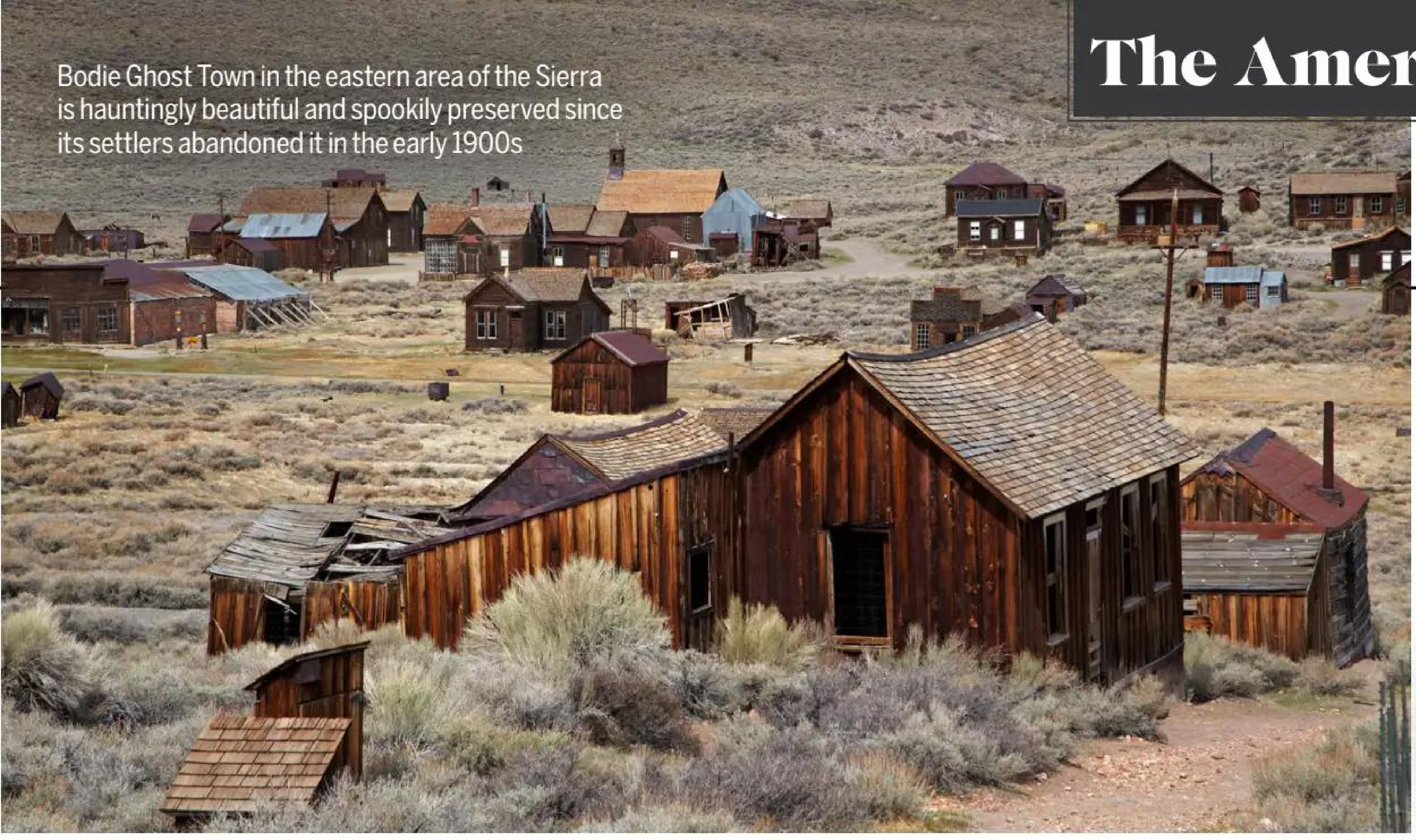
Lake Tahoe

While it is officially only the second deepest lake in the United States, with its cobalt blue and green waters sitting beneath the snow-capped mountains, Lake Tahoe is definitely in the running for the most beautiful lake in the country. It is, however, categorically the largest alpine lake in North America. Sitting astride the California-Nevada state lines, a drive around Lake Tahoe's scenic 116-kilometre (72-mile) shoreline offers a different experience from every angle, from the quiet and upscale northern shore to the rugged west, undeveloped east and bustling but downtrodden south close to the city of Reno. In the centre of the lake, on the west shore stands Fannette Island – the only island in all of Lake Tahoe – accessible only via boat. Over the years, the island has been called many different names by the local population, including Coquette, Fanette, Baranoff, Dead Man's, Hermit's, and Emerald Isle.



Bodie Ghost Town in the eastern area of the Sierra is hauntingly beautiful and spookily preserved since its settlers abandoned it in the early 1900s

Mammoth Lake is just one of the multiple amazing towns to visit in California, with a fascinating history and intriguing secrets hidden in its mountains

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Mount Whitney

Standing at 4,421 metres (14,505 feet) tall, Mount Whitney is the tallest mountain in California, as well as the highest summit in the United States and the Sierra Nevada. On average, a full trek ascending and descending Mount Whitney's challenging summit would take up to 18 hours, less if you are more physically fit than the average adventurer. A permit is needed to tackle the mountain all year round, but if taking the smaller routes they are generally easier to apply for. Inexperienced hikers should avoid heavy snow and opt for safer times of the year like the summer months. During the winter it is a popular destination for skiers and snowboarders. When up there, the scenes are truly beautiful, and it is no wonder why Mount Whitney is on the bucket list of many mountaineers, Before setting off, check which trail will be best for you and the equipment needed to ascend safely.

population had dwindled to almost zero. Entire houses full of possessions lay abandoned. For decades, the site sat derelict and decaying until it was purchased by the state in 1962. It has been preserved in a state of 'arrested decay' ever since. The eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada are prime locations for an abundance of recreational activities from fishing, hiking and backpacking, boating, skiing, snowmobiling and camping with stunning scenery packed into the landscape every step of the way.

Death Valley on the eastern border of California and Nevada (Inyo County) and in the southwestern region of the Sierra Nevada is one of the hottest places in the world at the height of summer. Furnace Creek inside Death Valley holds the record for the highest reliably recorded air temperature on Earth: 56.7 degrees Celsius (134 degrees Fahrenheit) on 10 July 1913. Despite its scary name and scorching temperatures, there is plenty to see on its trails, which if travelled wisely are beautiful. It has some of the most dramatic scenery in the southwest thanks to sand dunes, salt flats, mountains, craters and the lowest lake in North America. Meanwhile, in the southern Sierra, Yosemite National Park extends into the region, which is home to the impressive and mind-boggling Owens Valley. Until 1913, Owens Lake was a salty lake, but when Owens River was diverted into the Los Angeles Aqueduct, it quickly drained the water from the lake. What little was left of Owens Lake can be seen today. The area is a dried salt flat that contains some pooled water following significant rains. Solar evaporation ponds lie along the northern edge. Its famous red tinge in the wettest parts of the lakebed is a result of the red colour of salt-loving bacteria called halo bacteria.

It's clear to see that you could easily spend a lifetime touring the Sierra Nevada. Whichever path you choose to take on your travels, you will be spoilt for choice in any region, whether it's nature that brings you to its parks and trails or sporting activities that thrill you on the slopes that surround it. Its vast size means you can come back time and time again to discover new crevices in this exciting natural wonder.

Marine iguanas are the only ocean-swimming lizards on the planet, and are just some of the incredible animals that thrive on the Galápagos Islands

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Flights depart daily to the Galápagos Islands from mainland Ecuador.

Best time to visit:

Any time

Time zone:

UTC-6

CURRENCY

$

US DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.ecuadorexplorer.com/html/galapagos.html
www.southamericatourism.com/destination/galapagos-islands
www.galapagosislands.com

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THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

The only place on Earth where you can meet tropical penguins, giant tortoises and blue-footed boobies

Early explorers called this volcanic archipelago 'Las Islas Encantadas' (The Enchanted Isles), and for good reason. Isolated from humans, over 966 kilometres (600 miles) west of Ecuador, South America, the extraordinary flora and fauna have evolved undisturbed. The results of 'nature's greatest experiment' captivated naturalist Charles Darwin; his observations of the Galápagos Islands in 1835 inspired his theory of evolution.

Many creatures are completely unique to the Galápagos Islands, and because they evolved without major predators, they aren't fazed when humans pay them a visit. Rare tropical penguins, marine iguanas (the only ocean-swimming lizards) and birds with bright blue feet are just some of the incredible animals that thrive there, but the most iconic of them all has to be the giant tortoise. The islands were even named after them, as Galápagos means tortoise in Spanish. Specimens grow more than 1.5 metres (five feet) in length and live for over 100 years – the longest lifespan of all vertebrates. You'll find them taking a refreshing bath in the warm volcanic mud.

Amazingly, these islands were forged from a series of volcanic eruptions, millions of years ago. Darwin compared the dusty, desolate scenery to the infernos of hell, but to the modern-day observer, it's more like a prehistoric paradise. Crystal-clear waters, blue skies and a breathtaking selection of more than 2,900 species of marine fauna qualify this as one of the world's greatest snorkelling and diving destinations. If you're seeking undersea adventures, the best time of year to visit is during the rainy season, starting from as early as December to as late as June. Temperatures are warmer and the water is calmer, making for good visibility. Oddly, the dry season sees a drop in water temperatures and more cloud cover.

However, due to the islands' proximity to the equator, the climate is fairly consistent all year round. Temperatures range from 21 to 30 degrees Celsius (70 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit), so there is no bad time to visit. Having visited more than once, TV legend and naturalist Sir David Attenborough recommends allowing a week to see as many critters as you can. "And if you tell the islanders that's how long you've got, they will make sure that you see all those animals," he once said in an interview.

Make sure you bring a camera (waterproof if possible) and plenty of spare memory cards to capture all the sights. Other essential items to pack are a light waterproof jacket, sturdy walking shoes to navigate the lunar-like landscape, and a reusable water bottle. Remember that the Galápagos Islands are a national park and number one on the UNESCO Heritage list to protect its fragile ecosystem. For this reason, many parts are only accessible in the company of a guide, and both cruises and land-based tours are available. There are 19 islands – 13 large and six small – with a multitude of islets, but you don't need to visit them all to make the most of this natural wonder of the world.

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THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

Venture a little off the beaten path and explore the national parks that make up America's backbone

The Rocky Mountains, also known as the Rockies, include at least 100 separate mountain ranges and span across more than 4,828 kilometres (3,000 miles) – from the north of British Columbia in Western Canada all the way to New Mexico in southwestern America. The Rockies are certainly the perfect destination for travellers looking for an adventure. There's plenty to see and explore along the area known as America's backbone.

At the top of the list should be Yellowstone National Park, located in Wyoming, Montana. The world's first national park is home to around 60 per cent of the world's geysers, which are natural hot springs that erupt in towering explosions of boiling water and steam. You can experience a volcano's power first hand through the colourful hot springs and bubbling mud pits, as well as admire the wildlife and surrounding forests.

Elsewhere in the Rockies, you'll find Aspen, Colorado, which is a ski resort and outdoor recreation centre all year round. The ski resort is popular with wealthy holidaymakers thanks to its boutique shops, quality restaurants and the Wheeler Opera House.

On the Canada-United States border, you'll find Glacier National Park where you can enjoy various recreational activities. Take a tour of the park on one of the restored 1930s' White Motor Company coaches called Red Jammers, or enjoy a historic wooden boat tour on one of the larger lakes, as well as hiking and so much more! We'd recommend a visit to Apgar Nature Center as your first stop in the park, as you'll be able to gather advice and information. Lake McDonald is another highlight of the park; it's the largest lake in the park and the major hub of activity on the west side.

Make sure you check out Cliff Palace on your trip, which is the largest cliff dwelling in North America. Located in the Mesa Verde National Park, the structure was built by the Ancestral Pueblo people. You can explore the Cliff Palace on a guided tour only, and tickets for the tour can be bought at the visitor centre or research centre. The tour retraces the steps of the old inhabitants, and visitors must climb down a stone stairway and four three-metre (ten-foot) ladders.

The Rocky Mountain National Park is a natural spectacle that must be seen by all. The park can be busy in the summer months, but there are still plenty of untamed and little-explored areas that are perfect for lovers of nature. If meandering through the wildflowers isn't for you, then hit the Trail Ridge Road, which takes you up to 3,660 metres (12,000 feet), giving you stunning views of the alpine and subalpine worlds below.

Enjoy live volcanic activity in Yellowstone National Park

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Always check the weather before you set off – it can be life threatening in the depths of the Rockies.

Best time to visit:

All year

Time zone:

Various

CURRENCY

$

US/CANADIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.westtrek.com/rocky-mountains
www.nps.gov
www.yellowstonenationalpark.com

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RIO DE JANEIRO

Bathe in the Brazilian sunshine in the country's seaside city

Known to locals as the Cidade Maravilhosa – the marvellous city – it is not hard to believe that Rio de Janeiro is seen as the beating heart of Brazil. The city is formed of endless stretches of golden sand, unmissable fiestas and boundless mountains as its backdrop. The beaches are one of the main attractions that have lured travellers in over the years, with one of the most famous being Copacabana beach. Stretching over four kilometres (2.5 miles) of white sand, the beach is a great place to hang out and watch the world go by with a caipirinha! Other note-worthy beaches include the nearby beach of Ipanema. It is from this local spot that visitors can expect an unforgettable view of the Dois Irmãos (two brothers). These two mountains sit at the western end of the beach and form an unusual backdrop to it.

When swimming in these shores, it's always best to bear in mind that Ipanema is an indigenous word for 'bad, dangerous waters', which is no surprise given the strong undercurrent and usually choppy surface of the ocean. If there's anything to be learnt from visiting these beaches it's that the locals use them as their back garden. Expect to see countless games of volleyball, surfers playing in the waves, rollerbladers gliding the pavements and power-walkers marching along the promenade. It appears that all of Rio's residents take to the beach to escape the hustle and bustle of city life. With such a laid-back approach on the beaches, it's easy to forget that you're in a city.

If beaches aren't your thing and you prefer sinking your teeth into the culture, then why not embark on a tour to the favelas, or the shanty towns, which form the backbone to this urban jungle. During the 1970s, favelas started to grow, as many people fled the countryside in search of more opportunities in the city. Today in Rio alone there are more than 800 favelas; 1.5 million people call a favela home. Part of the appeal to visit the favelas is the unusual architecture. Each has a unique and distinct design to its building, which is usually a stack of misshapen buildings piled on top of one another like Lego. Arguably the most famous of Rio's favelas is Santa Marta, located in Botafogo. Its fame is due to a Michael Jackson tribute statue that can be found here. The largest of the favelas of Rio is Rocinha, but it's not advised to visit here unless you are travelling with a tour guide, as it can be unsafe.

A trip to Rio would not be complete without taking the cable car up to Sugarloaf mountain,

> On the beaches it's easy to forget that you're in a city

Don't miss the unbeatable view from the top of Corcovado

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

At the airport, go to the departure zone to take a taxi. Taxis are less expensive here than at the arrival zone.

Best time to visit:

February (to ensure you don't miss out on Carnival)

Time zone:

UTC-3

CURRENCY

R$ BRAZILIAN REAL

Useful sites:

www.brazil.org.za/rio-de-janeiro-city.html
www.riodejaneiro.com/v/city-info
www.gringo-rio.com/accommodation-travel-in-rio/getting-around-rio

Take the cable car up to the top of Sugarloaf Mountain to see the 360-degree view of the city and its golden beaches

Embrace the colours and sounds of the biggest party on Earth

also known as Pão de Açúca. This is one of the several monolithic granite and quartz mountains that tower over the city. This picture-perfect mountain reaches 396 metres (1,299 feet), and invites visitors to experience a 360-degree view of the city, Guanabara Bay and the endless blue waters of the Atlantic that form below it. In order to reach the summit, you have to ascend in two stages: first to the top of Urca Hill and then from here in a cable car to the top of the mountain. Both journeys last a total of three minutes, and tickets for the experience can be bought at the base of the mountain.

If partying is what you are after, then you've come to the right place! Music, samba and dance flow through this city, and it's not an unusual site to find people dancing in the streets. The biggest party of all falls in February each year, and is commonly known as Rio Carnival. The world's best-known party calls on more than two million people to flock to the streets and dance the days away to the sounds of the samba. During Carnival season, local samba schools show off their rhythm in the Sambódrom – a purpose-built exhibition space to hold the samba parade. Party-goers can also enjoy the beat by boogying at one of the 500 street parties that continue way into the early hours of the morning. If you plan on visiting Rio during Carnival, it's best to pack your dancing shoes, sequins and endless feathers, as they don't take dressing up lightly! The wackier the costume, the more you're likely to fit in and feel at home – just watch out for the 'Bate Bolas', a group of young men dressed as vibrant jesters with beach-ball whips.

If you have any energy left, hail a taxi to the district of Lapa, as this is another great place to dance and grab a generously sized caprinha. Rio is absolutely overflowing with energy and life – it truly is the city that never sleeps.

Sink your teeth into the culture of Rio and visit a neighbouring favela

Soak up the sun with a caprinha on the famous beach of Copocabana

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Christ the Redeemer

At the top of Corcovado sits the iconic art-deco statue of Christ the Redeemer standing in all its glory. Located at Parque Nacional de Tijuca, 710 metres (2,329 feet) above sea level, it's impossible to imagine a trip to Rio without marvelling at the grandeur of the granite peak. Reaching the statue can be an achievement in itself. After the 20-minute train ride, there are more than 220 steps that need climbing to lead you to the famous statue's feet. However, it's worth the effort when you reach the top and can see the panoramic views of the city that fall at the feet of Corcovado. Anyone who travels on Corcovado's railway also helps to preserve the forest, as a proportion of the fee goes towards the Brazilian Institute of the Environment (IBAMA), which is in charge of forest conservation.

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MOUNT RUSHMORE

Make a pilgrimage to the monumental shrine to American democracy

In his attempt to entice tourists to South Dakota, state historian Doane Robinson was prepared to think big. Literally. His huge idea was to carve the likenesses of pioneering explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Oglala chief 'Red Cloud' and legendary showman 'Buffalo Bill' Cody into the granite pillars known as the Needles in the Black Hills.

Within a year, he had persuaded sculptor Gutzon Borglum to visit the state and accept the commission. However, Borglum had two conditions. First, he considered the heavily pitted and eroded surface of the Needles to be unsuitable for carving and suggested that the southeastern face Mount Rushmore would be better. Second, he suggested that the portraits of Wild West legends be replaced with more significant figures: the American presidents.

So began the United States' most majestic monument. Over 14 years, 400 workers undertook the task of carving the 18-metre-high (59-foot-high) faces of four presidents into Rushmore's granite. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt were the four heads of state chosen, each selected for their roles in protecting and expanding the American republic. The faces were painstakingly revealed from the tough rock; larger sections were removed with dynamite, smaller sections were moulded with drills.

Borglum did not live to see his life's work fulfilled. He died in March 1941, but his son, Lincoln, saw the finishing touches applied six months later. The elder Borglum actually had even grander ambitions, since he wanted the presidents to be depicted to their waists and to add a panel in the shape of the Louisiana Purchase to commemorate milestones in American expansion. Those suggestions were quickly quashed on the grounds of cost, as was the campaign to add women's suffrage campaigner Susan Anthony alongside the presidential quadrumvirate.

Even if it remains incomplete in terms of its sculptor's initial vision, Mount Rushmore is still a magnificent shrine to American democracy. To truly understand the mountainous scale of the achievement, head to the Lincoln Borglum Museum with its fancy multimedia exhibits – push the explosive plunger to re-create dynamite blasting the face of Mount Rushmore and see where Gutzon Borglum worked on scale models of the mountain. From there, head to the Grand View Terrace, the best place from which to take in the whole of the carving, then get up close and personal with each of the four faces on the Presidential Trail. This kilometre (half-mile) walking trail passes close to each visage, and offers a fitting opportunity to spot a soaring bald eagle, the national animal of the United States. However, bear in mind that many Native Americans still consider the Black Hills to be sacred territory, and see the sculpture as another example of the seizure of their land.

There is little reason to rush to the Black Hills, though. With current rates of erosion, it's thought that the four presidential noses – each of which is six metres (20 feet) in length – will eventually wear away in 2.4 million years.

Behind Lincoln's head is the little-known Hall of Records with a vault containing replicas of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

If possible, view at daybreak for a less crowded experience.

Best time to visit:

September and October

Time zone:

UTC-6

CURRENCY
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US DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.nps.gov/moru
www.travelsouthdakota.com/explore-with-us/great-8/mount-rushmore
www.blackhillsbadlands.com/parks-monuments/mount-rushmore-national-memorial

Salt cones on the reflected surface of the salt flat

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

It is required for most visitors of Bolivia to carry a yellow fever certificate.

Best time to visit:
December to April

Time zone:
UTC-4

CURRENCY
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BOLIVIA BOLIVIANO

Useful sites:
www.boliviahop.com/discounts/salt-flat-tours-and-discounts
www.bolivianlife.com/salt-flat-tours-bolivia-salar-de-uyuni
www.visitbolivia.org/home.php

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SALAR DE UYUNI

Take a selfie in the world's largest mirror in Bolivia

No trip to Bolivia would be complete without a visit to the world's largest salt flats – the Salar de Uyuni. Nestled amid the Andes at 3,565 metres (11,696 feet) above sea level lie the endless stretch of salt flats covering a whopping 10,582 square kilometres (4,086 square miles) of land that was once prehistoric lakes. During wet season, running from December to April, these flats are covered with a thin sheet of water, which enables the sky to be perfectly mirrored onto the ground. Many tourists pause here to play with the endless backdrop and the depth of field.

Before embarking on your tour, it's a good idea to pack a silly prop so that you can stage unrealistic scenes and play with the perspective of the boundless horizon. Toy dinosaurs are a common accessory for tourists. If placed correctly, they can be used to stage battle scenes and make it appear as though you are being chased by giants. When planning a visit during the wet season, it's best to be mindful of the rainfall, as heavy downpours can sometimes lead to tour cancellations. From May to November, travellers can expect a different kind of view as the flats become covered in salt, making the landscape appear stark and endlessly white. It is also during this season that the ground becomes a lucrative exportation site for salt and lithium.

During the dry season, travellers can expect to be able to explore parts of the salt flats that are usually unexplorable during the wet season. There are many entry points to the salt flats from both Bolivia and Chile, but the most common jumping-off point is Uyuni, Bolivia. From Bolivia, the common route to Uyuni is from La Paz, which is around eight hours away from Uyuni. The less recommended route is from San Pedro de Atacama, Chile. This is an 11-hour journey and as there is no direct bus to Uyuni, it can become quite an unpleasant experience. Therefore, if travelling from Chile it is easier to book a three-day tour.

Once reaching the small, dusty village of Uyuni, you will find that it is well equipped with various tour operators offering 4x4 trips into the centre of the world's giant mirage. Many of these tour operators either run short tours of one day or extended tours of three days. These tours are frequently run in mixed groups, and are a great way of meeting new friends. Dependent on time, it is worth embarking on the latter option, as it enables you to explore more of the Atiplano region en route to the salt flats. You can marvel at many of the other sites that Mother Nature has to offer, including deserts, volcanoes, geysers, hot springs and high-altitude lakes, before stopping at the jaw-dropping site of the salt flats.

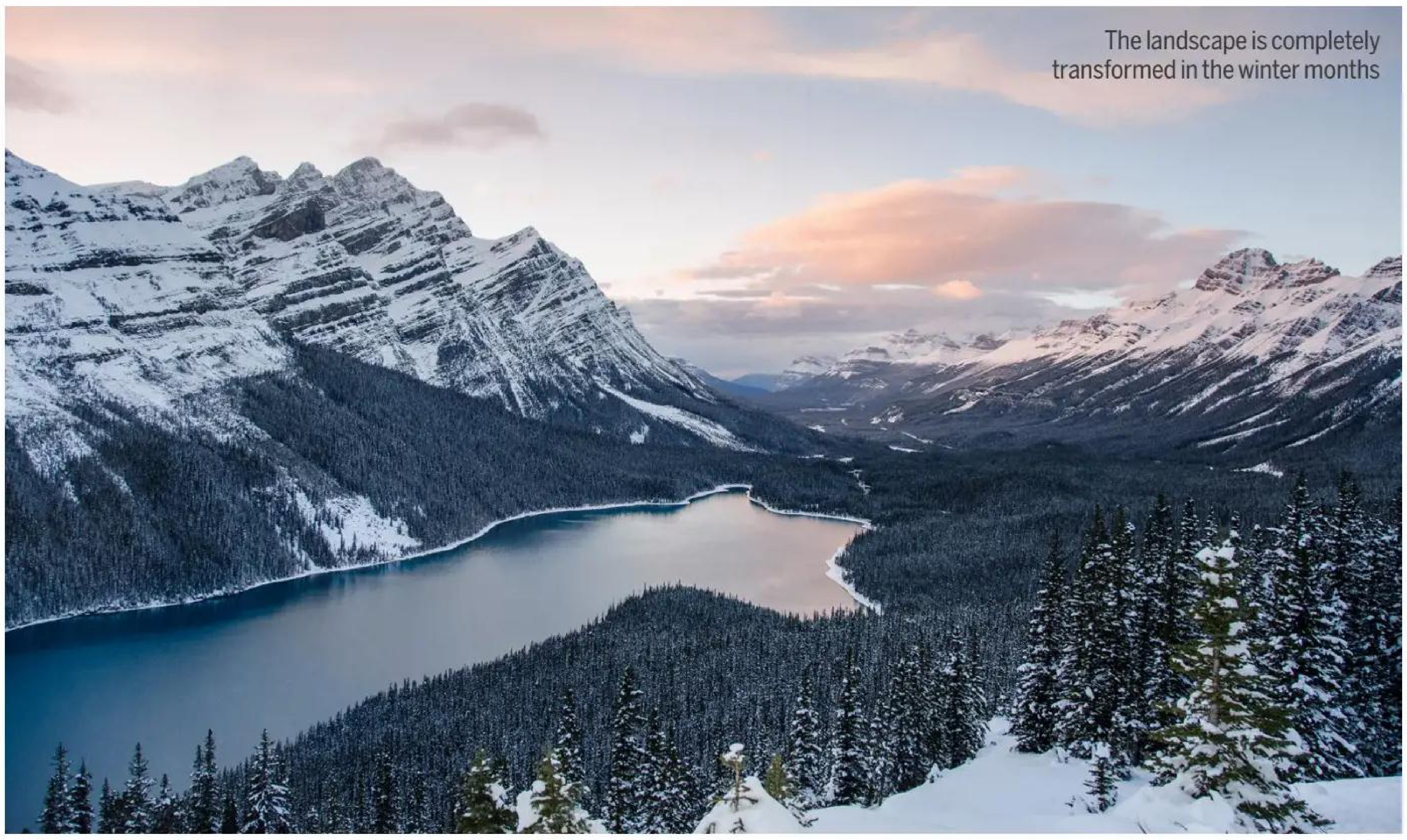
75 BANFF

Experience a true Canadian adventure in this picturesque tourist town

Set off on a Canadian adventure and head straight for Banff – you won't be disappointed. This stunning resort town, situated in Alberta, offers everything from skiing and hiking to tasty food and hot springs. Whether you go in the summer or winter, there will be a plethora of activities for you and your travel buddies.

The historic town of Banff is surrounded by a stunning backdrop of rugged mountains, and the downtown streets are lined with top-class restaurants, bars, shops, museums and art galleries – on the chilled days that you want to spend in the town, you won't be short of things to do. When the tourist town was built, Banff National Park's first superintendent purposefully arranged the town's first street so that it gave the best possible view of Cascade Mountain. The town is quite small, so getting around on foot is easy. Make sure you head to Banff Avenue or Bear Street in order to pick up a souvenir or two from one of the shops – maple chocolates are particularly tasty.

In the winter, the streets will be lined with snow, and Banff town is the perfect base for those on a skiing holiday. Nearby there are three accessible world-class ski resorts to choose from, which can be accessed via car or a regularly scheduled bus service. The mountains here offer a variety of terrains that will suit every level of skier or snowboarder, and you'll find some of the fluffiest and lightweight powder here. The skiing season is long and typically lasts from mid-November until late-May, so there's plenty of time to get your ski on. The ski resorts include Mount Norquay, the Lake Louise Ski Resort, and Sunshine Village.


The landscape is completely transformed in the winter months

Explore Banff National Park with some cross-country skiing

One of the best things about staying in this area is that you can buy one lift pass – SkiBig3 ticket – that enables you to go to all three, as well as get free transportation to the resort from town. This handy pass gives you unlimited skiing on the mountains, complimentary access to the Banff Hot Springs, and admission to the Whyte Museum, as well as welcome discounts on a range of activities and in restaurants.

If tumbling down a mountain isn't really your thing, or you'd like to add a bit of variety to your trip, explore Banff National Park with some cross-country skiing. It's a great way to explore the area in the winter months, and there are a

Why not try your hand at ice climbing at the Johnston Canyon?

Mount Rundle and the Banff Hoodoos in late afternoon

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

In the winter months, it's a good idea to layer up in terms of clothing, to factor in both snow and sunshine.

Best time to visit:

All year

Time zone:

UTC-6

Useful sites:

www.banfflakelouise.com
www.snowtips-bactrax.com/
Other Winter_Equipment.html
www.skibig3.com

CURRENCY
$
CANADIAN DOLLAR

number of trails that will suit different fitness levels. There's also the option of snowshoeing, ice-skating or regular hiking for exploring the area, and you can rent snowshoes or winter boots from Bactrax.

There are a number of organised tours operated from the resort town as well, including a dog-sled tour. Learn the history of dog sledding in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, and you'll also get a change to meet the trainers and dogs themselves. For more of an adrenaline rush, you can also head off on an ice-climbing adventure or partake in some crazy heli-skiing.

The resort of Banff isn't just for winter-sports enthusiasts – there is plenty on offer in the summer months too. Hiking is a popular pastime in this area thanks to the incredible scenery. Head off for an early-morning hike and admire the peace and quiet – setting off for an early-morning hike is probably the best way to truly enjoy the most popular routes: Tunnel Mountain, Johnston Canyon and the Tea House Hikes. For a real buzz, consider heli-hiking, where you will be choppered up to stunning locations miles from your average hikers and dropped off to explore the less-explored parts. If you are new to hiking or just want a bit more information about the history, there are a number of guided hikes that you can sign up to in town.

In the summer months, biking is a great way to explore the area. From road cycling on the Bow Valley Highway towards Lake Louise or speeding down mountain-biking tracks to cruising along the Banff Legacy Trail taking in the scenery, there's a biking adventure for every level.

Before the water freezes solid in the winter, enjoy one of a number of water-based activities to cool off during the summer. The lakes and rivers in Banff National Park will either offer you peace, calm and tranquillity or exhilarating adventure. Hop in a canoe or kayak, or aboard a paddleboard or raft and get on the water. Bow River is accessible from downtown Banff, and you can rent a canoe or kayak by the hour or day. Within minutes of setting off you'll be surrounded by impressive scenery and mountain vistas.

Explore the mountains without having to ski down them and get a gondola up to the top of Sulphur Mountain. Named after its sulphurous hot springs found on the lower slopes, you'll be amazed by the incredible view of the surrounding area that this mountain offers. The Banff gondola is open all year, and the eight-minute ride will take you to the summit at 2,281 metres (7,484 feet). On the summit ridge you'll find restaurants, observation decks and interpretive boardwalks – make sure that you take your camera because the view is truly breathtaking.

One of the most popular sights in Banff National Park is Johnston Canyon. It is a must-see natural attraction, with intimidating canyon walls, waterfalls, deep pools and lush forests. In the spring, summer and autumn it is a stunning place to take a walk and enjoy the deep-blue creek, then in the winter it transforms into a popular place for ice-climbing and ice walking.

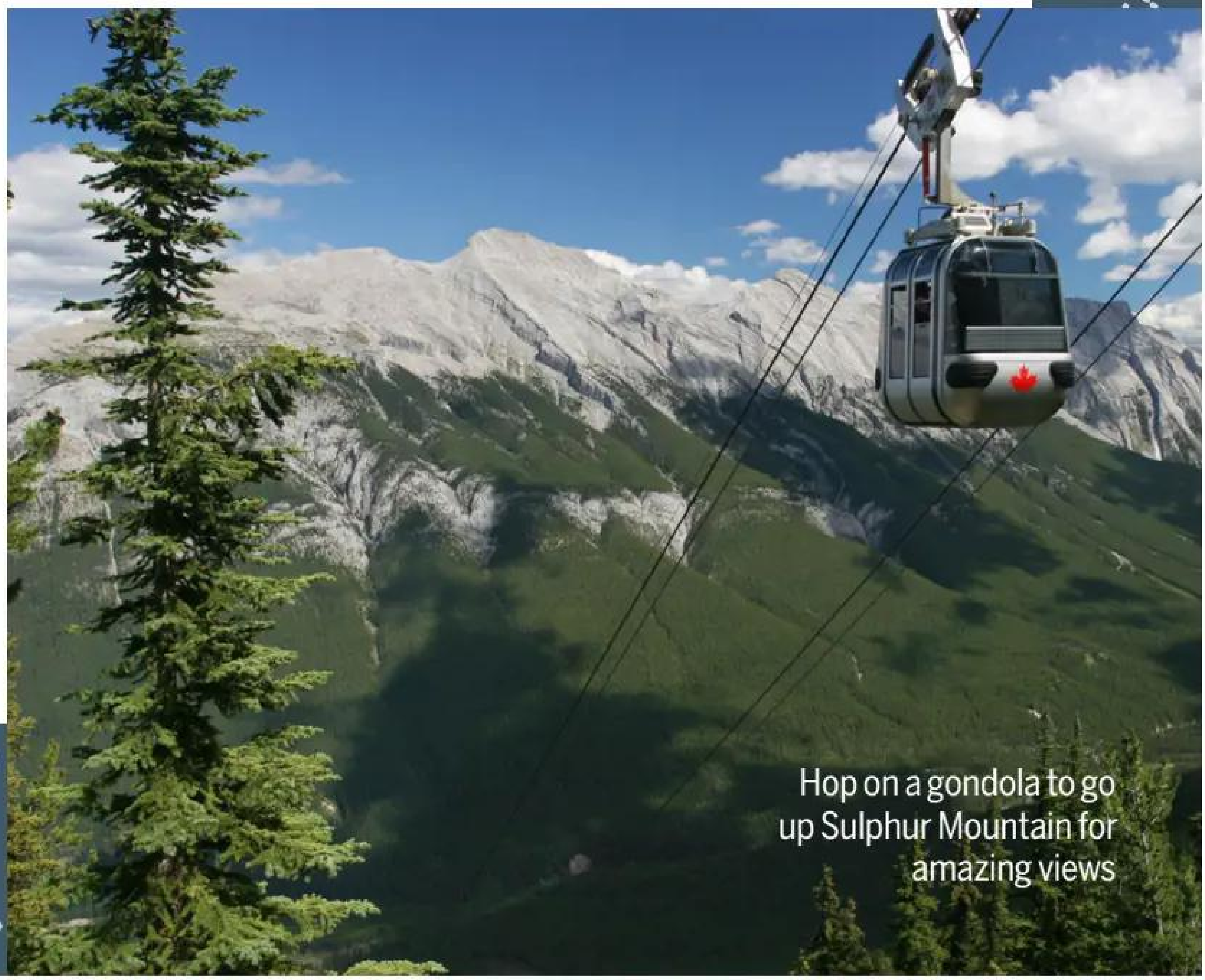
If you get all adventured out, you might want some relaxation time to end your trip, so head to one of the town's many spas. Or go to Banff National Park's hot springs at any time of year – locals recommend a morning visit for the most relaxation and the crispest air.

76 Lake Louise

Lake Louise is a nearby hamlet that is famous for its stunning turquoise lake. In the summer it shimmers and glistens the most beautiful colour, and in the winter months it freezes almost solid, creating a magical alpine winter wonderland.

The lake is by far the key attraction here. In the summer you'll find a canoe dock on the water's edge, and in the winter it transforms into the most stunning ice rink. You can hire ice skates from the striking hotel that sits on the eastern shore, Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, which also creates a beautiful ice sculpture that can be skated around.

To add to the truly magical winter experience, why not hop on a horse-drawn sleigh and travel into the middle of the frozen lake to get a better view of the glacier that feeds it?



Hop on a gondola to go up Sulphur Mountain for amazing views

77 GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

Cross America's Golden Gate on the most famous bridge in the world

The Golden Gate, a short stretch of water connecting San Francisco Bay to the Pacific Ocean, is by no means the most impressive strait in the world. Around 1.6 kilometres (one mile) in width, it separates Marin County from San Francisco. Nevertheless, when city officials announced that they wanted to build a bridge across the Golden Gate in the 1920s, many doubted that it could be done. Strong winds, swirling currents and thick fog would blight construction, they said, while ferocious storms would bring any completed bridge crashing down.

Nevertheless, work began in 1933 to erect a suspension bridge designed by the relatively unknown architect Irving Morrow, who previously specialised in building houses and commercial buildings. Yet Morrow struck gold on his first bridge, creating such a graceful and well-proportioned design with Art Deco decorations that the Golden Gate Bridge would become the symbol of the Bay City. It was also Morrow who decided that the bridge should be painted a distinctive shade of orange, despite the complaints of the US Navy who wanted it in black and yellow stripes to ensure that passing ships did not collide with the bridge.

In May 1937, four years after the first foundation was dug, the bridge opened with a week-long party. At the time, Baysiders celebrated having the longest and tallest suspension bridge in the world. Those records have now been surpassed – it is now the 14th longest and 21st tallest – but the Golden Gate Bridge continues to be the most famous. Aside from carrying commuters driving along US Route 101 and California State Route 1, the bridge has a daily influx of tourists who walk or cycle along part of the 2.7-kilometre (1.7-mile) path. Others choose to visit the visitor centre at the San Francisco end, where five exhibition areas explore the history and engineering of the bridge. Here, you'll discover that 1.2 million rivets were used in the bridge and, most unusually, it was completed ahead of schedule and came in under budget.

Although getting up close to the Golden Gate Bridge is a must for any visitor to San Francisco, some of the best views come from afar. Golden Gate National Recreation Area includes the parkland surrounding the bridge, and it is from here that some of the finest vistas can be found. The beach at Kirby Cove might claim to be the most impressive of all, and also has pre-bookable overnight pitches that allow happy campers to see the bridge illuminated at night and peeping through the fog in the morning.

The doubters who thought the Golden Gate was unbridgeable were proven spectacularly wrong. The bridge has only been shut three times in more than 80 years due to high winds, and has survived everything the San Andreas Fault has so far thrown at it. In 1911, long before work on the Golden Gate Bridge began, President Taft christened San Francisco as 'the city that knows how'. It certainly knows how to build an iconic bridge.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

The walkway is closed to pedestrians and/or cyclists at certain times of day. ✈

Best time to visit:

September and October to avoid the heaviest morning fog

Time zone:

UTC-8

CURRENCY

$ US DOLLAR

Useful sites:

goldengatebridge.org/visitors
www.parksconservancy.org/visit/park-sites/golden-gate-bridge.html
www.nps.gov/goga

The famous colour – international orange – was chosen to complement the natural surroundings and enhance the bridge's visibility in fog

Iguazú Falls were voted one of the 'New7Wonders of Nature'

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Take your passport (and visas if required) if you are visiting both sides.

Best time to visit:

March to April and August to September (for higher water levels)

Time zone:

UTC-3

Useful sites:

www.iguazuargentina.com/en
iguazufalls.com
http://www.iguassufallstour.com/

CURRENCY
$/R$
ARGENTINE PESO/ BRAZILIAN REAL

78

IGUAZÚ FALLS

These awe-inspiring waterfalls are an unmissable sight for any South American trip

"Poor Niagara!" exclaimed former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt upon seeing Iguazú Falls for the first time – and it's not hard to see why. Taller than Niagara and wider than Victoria, Iguazú comprises around 275 distinct falls over which an average of 1.5 million litres of water pour per second. They might not be the most famous, but the stunning staircase-like cascades of the Iguazú River are arguably the most impressive.

The falls are located along the border between Argentina and Brazil, so you can visit from either country. Each side provides a different vista and range of experiences for tourists. It's worth visiting both if you can, but if you only have the time or budget for one, it all depends on what you'd most like to see.

The majority of the falls can be accessed on the Argentinean side; there are more vantage points and you can get within touching distance of the falls along several circuits of man-made walkways. If you're visiting on a sunny day, you are also much more likely to see glorious single or double rainbows through the spray from this side of the border.

Across the border, the Brazilian side provides more panoramic views so you can marvel at the full scale of the falls. You can also take helicopter tours of the area (not currently available on the Argentinian side), to experience breathtaking sights of the waterfalls from above.

Both sides offer boat tours, which are a fantastic way to get closer to appreciate the sheer power of the cascades. Just be sure to bring waterproofs with you – some trips will include an Iguazú 'baptism', taking you right under the falling water!

The falls are located within two national parks, which are UNESCO World Heritage sites. Besides the waterfalls themselves, both Iguazú National Park (Argentina) and Iguaçu National Park (Brazil) contain lush subtropical rainforests, home to rare flora and fauna, including jaguars, tapirs, giant anteaters and harpy eagles.

Several operators run tours to explore the parks beyond the waterfalls – such as jungle safaris and visits to native reservations – offering plenty of experiences to make the most of your Iguazú adventure. One particular highlight on the Brazilian side is the bird sanctuary, Parque das Aves, which is the largest of its kind in South America. It's home to more than 800 birds (plus butterflies, reptiles and more) that are no longer able to live safely in the wild. Walking through the park's large aviaries you will encounter wonderful tropical birds like macaws, toucans and parakeets, and meet them face-to-beak.

For a truly unforgettable stay, you can book rooms with unparalleled views at one of the two luxury five-star hotels overlooking the Iguazú Falls: Hotel Meliá Iguazú (Argentinean side) and Belmond das Cataratas (Brazilian side). However, there are plenty of other, more wallet-friendly accommodation options in the nearby cities of Foz do Iguaçu, Brazil, and Puerto Iguazú, Argentina, for budget-conscious travellers. You can get to the falls from both cities by bus, but many hotels will organise shuttle services or private taxis for you, which will be quicker.

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LAS VEGAS

Seen from space, Las Vegas shines bright, but it's more than lights that make Sin City stand out

Bright neon signs, flashy casinos and getting hitched in front of Elvis. Mention Las Vegas and these are probably the first things that spring to mind. And yes, it is all of these things; the city really does dazzle. According to NASA, if you're looking down at Earth from space, it's the brightest location on the planet. Because of its reputation, most people either love or hate the idea of visiting, but it should definitely be on your bucket list because, whoever you are, this surprising ray of light has something for you.

Vegas really is unlike anywhere else. The six-kilometre (four-mile) stretch down Las Vegas Boulevard, known as the 'Strip', is lined with some of the biggest hotels; it's as if you've landed in a glamorous theme park that takes you around the globe. Take a trip to Venice at The Venetian, gliding down the canal on a gondola past old Italian villas, or see the Statue of Liberty at New York, New York. The 30-storey pyramid at the Luxor will transport you to Ancient Egypt, while at the Paris Las Vegas Hotel you can sit at a café with a view of the Eiffel Tower. From the dancing fountains at the Bellagio to the iconic Vegas sign, the sights and attractions are jaw-dropping.

Vegas truly is a world of glitz and glamour. With more than 40 million visitors a year, the city has earned its title as the entertainment and gambling capital of the world. It has some of the biggest casinos and nightclubs. The largest of these, Sunset Station Hotel and Casino, is located off the strip, but other popular hotels for gambling include the Wynn and the Venetian. If you like slot machines, head to the ARIA; for table games the Golden Nugget has the most choice; and if you're not a gambler try LEVEL UP, the gaming lounge at the MGM Grand.

If you'd rather dance the night away, there's more than enough choice. See world-famous DJs at Hakkasan, one of the world's biggest nightclubs, or indulge in opulence at the Wynn's XS Nightclub.

If you want to enjoy a drink in a more intimate setting, the bars are just as exceptional. For sheer luxury, visit Chandelier at the Cosmopolitan where you can order a cocktail under a giant chandelier made from two million crystals, or relax at the lavish Vesper Bar, which is decked out in chrome and mirror tiles. For breathtaking views of the city, check out the bar at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

The city is also known for its wild pool parties. The Rehab Beach Club at the Hard Rock Hotel is where it all started, but again the choice is huge with epic pool parties like Wet Republic at the MGM Grand and Mandalay Bay.

WELCOME
TO Fabulous
LAS VEGAS
NEVADA

A visit to Vegas wouldn't be complete without a trip to the iconic Vegas sign

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

UK citizens must apply for an ESTA (Electronic System for Travel Authorization) to visit the US.

Best time to visit:

March to May and September to November (to avoid the heat)

Time zone:

UTC-7)

CURRENCY

$ US DOLLARS

Useful sites:

www.cirquedusoleil.com/las-vegas
www.vegas.com/tours
nocovernightclubs.com/nightclubs

Take a trip in a gondola and experience a taste of Italy at The Venetian

The Las Vegas skyline is definitely worth seeing at night

> Downtown is the historic heart of the city

But entertainment doesn't stop there. Some of the world's best musical artists hold regular shows, and don't miss Cirque du Soleil's 'O', the water-based spectacular at the Mirage.

Despite its reputation, Vegas actually has a great deal of history. Downtown is the historic heart of the city where you'll find the Golden Nugget, one of the city's oldest casinos, the Neon Museum and the Mob Museum, which takes you back to a time when gangsters ran the casinos. These are all highly recommended as they highlight just how far Las Vegas has come: from the desert home of Native Americans to the fastest growing city in America.

Visitors can take a short drive to one of the seven wonders of the engineering world – Hoover Dam – and see Lake Mead, the nation's largest reservoir. Hoover Dam is steeped in history. It was built in 1935 after gambling was legalised, giving the city the power to light up the casinos, which were at the time run by the mob.

If you want to explore other areas of natural beauty, Red Rock Canyon is only 20 minutes away, and the south rim of the Grand Canyon is a five-hour drive.

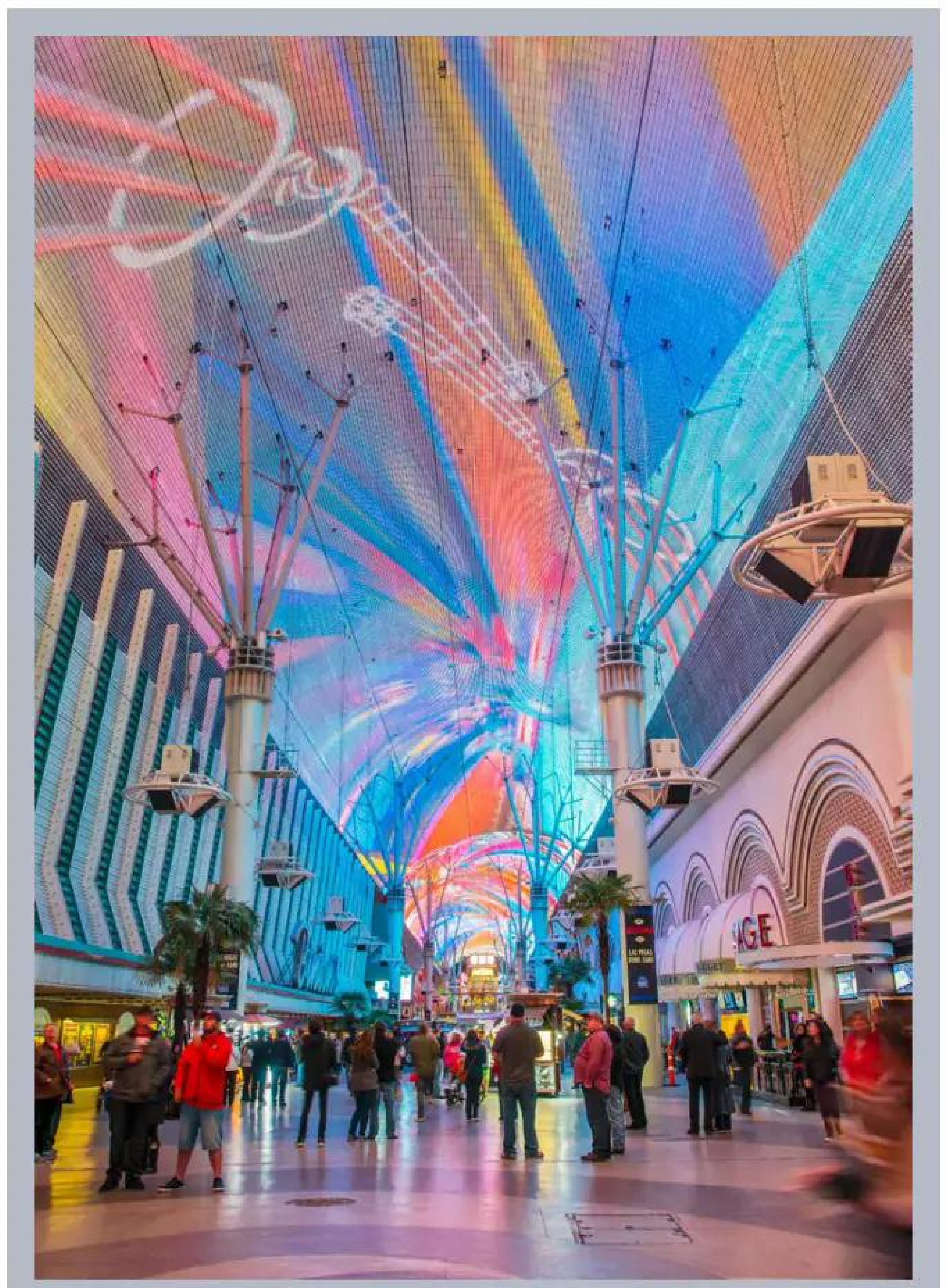
You wouldn't think to mention Vegas as a top food destination, but it is. You can find food from every culture, from pizza and sushi to tacos and steak. You can't go to Vegas without having a steak. Try SW Steakhouse, one of only three restaurants in the US that serves authentic Kobe beef. Vegas is known for its buffets as this was a way to keep gamblers in the casinos by providing large quantities of cheap food. With more than 70 buffets it'll be hard to choose one, but the Baccanal Buffet at Caesar's Palace is highly ranked. The city is also famous for its brunches – make sure you go to Hash House a Go Go. If you've got cash to splash, the city has the highest volume of restaurants run by celebrated chefs, and is becoming known for its fine-dining. If you can only treat yourself once, taste 'Chef of the Century' Joel Robuchon's food at MGM Grand.

Adrenaline junkies will have lots to keep them busy. Jump off the 108th floor of the Stratosphere hotel at SkyJump or, if rollercoasters are more your thing, the Canyon Blaster at Circus Circus is the world's only indoor double loop, double corkscrew. There's also the Manhattan Express at New York, New York and Desperado at Buffalo Bill's. Adventurers can go indoor skydiving, mountain biking and much more along the Strip and further afield. Sports fanatics can bet at Caesar's Palace or play golf at championship golf courses including Bali Hai Golf Club.

Shop in style at some stunning shopping venues, from the Forum shops at Greco-Roman themed Caesar's Palace to the Grand Canal Shoppes at The Venetian. For luxury shopping take a trip to Crystals at CityCentre; for popular brands there are more than 200 stores at the Fashion Show Mall; and if you're after a discount try the Las Vegas North Premium Outlets.

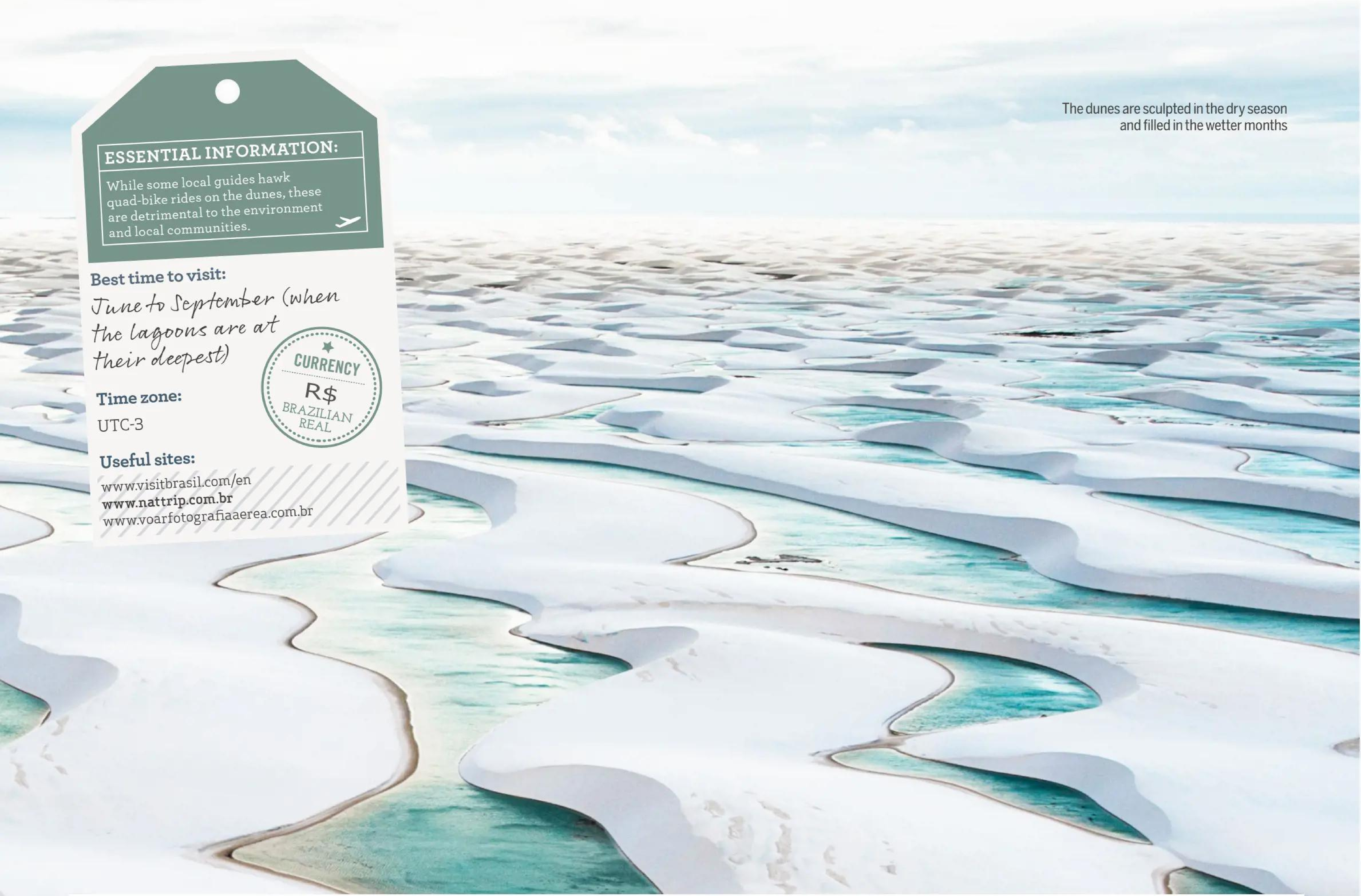
Vegas also has some of the best spas in the world. Be pampered like a queen with a euphoric synchronised massage at Encore, a gemstone facial at ARIA or skin treatment using 24-carat gold at Qua Baths & Spa.

They say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and whether you get up to mischief of some sort or not, there's definitely at least one reason that you should stay in Vegas and just see what happens.



Family fun

Despite its reputation, Vegas is not just for late-night revellers. There's plenty to keep the whole family entertained. If the kids want a bit of excitement, the Adventure Dome Theme Park at Circus Circus and the High Roller Observation Wheel are great fun. For something extra-special, visit Fremont Street to zipline through the indoor mall or see the Viva vision light and music show. For animal lovers, try Shark Reef Aquarium or Siegfried & Roy's Secret Garden And Dolphin Habitat. The hotels also provide plenty of child-friendly entertainment from Bellagio's Conservation and Botanical Gardens to the Tournament of Kings at the medieval-themed Excalibur Hotel. Let them play in a treehouse at the Downtown Container or channel their inner superheroes at the Avengers STATION Museum. If your youngsters have a sweet tooth, take them to Hershey's Chocolate or M&M World. The fun is endless.



The dunes are sculpted in the dry season and filled in the wetter months

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

While some local guides hawk quad-bike rides on the dunes, these are detrimental to the environment and local communities.

Best time to visit:

June to September (when the lagoons are at their deepest)

CURRENCY
R$
BRAZILIAN REAL

Time zone:

UTC-3

Useful sites:

www.visitbrasil.com/en
www.nattrip.com.br
www.voarfotografiaaerea.com.br

80

LENÇÓIS MARANHENSES

In northeast Brazil, the elements conspire to create the most unlikely of partnerships

Strewn across Brazil's northeast coastline state of Maranhão is a natural marvel unlike any other. A desert of alternating white sand dunes and sparkling turquoise lagoons stretches out towards the horizon, like a million perfectly crumpled little beaches. Or rather, crumpled bedsheets, which the name Lençóis Maranhenses – the 'Bedsheets of Maranhão' – suggests.

Covering 1,554 square kilometres (600 square miles), across 70 kilometres (44 miles) of shoreline, the national park is one of Brazil's unsung wonders, and South America's largest field of sand dunes. The best way to truly immerse in Lençóis Maranhenses is with an extended hike. These typically set off from the state capital and former colonial city of São Luís, rambling by sun and moon for just shy of a week. Adventurers sail down the mangroves of Rio Preguiças, named after its resident sloth population, before traversing the dunes, and bathing in the crystalline blue and green lagoons. By the full moon, they sleep beneath the stars – snug in the hammocks and fishermen's huts of the village of Atins and the oasis communities of Baixa Grande and Queimada dos Britos.

Casual day-trippers, who prefer to find their own way to the dunes or play in the sand can hire local guides and transportation from the city of Barreirinhas, 250 kilometres (155 miles) from São Luís. If slogging through sand gets too much, just add horses – multi-day horseback rides are a memorable, environmentally friendly alternative to hiking the taxing dunes.

The national park is home to an incredible array of wildlife, including the endangered scarlet ibis, neotropical otter, northern tiger cat and Indian manatee. Meanwhile, the mangroves are also host the spectacled caiman, red brocket and lowland paca. At times, when local rivers cut through, fish are able to make their way into the temporary pools – some, such as the wolfish, even embedding themselves in the mud until the wet season begins.

Although a third of the earth is covered in desert, there is no other quite like this. The dunes are formed from sand deposited by the Parnaíba and Preguiças rivers. During the dry season, heavy winds push the sand up to 48 kilometres (30 miles) inland, sculpting dunes 50 metres (164 feet) high. Just outside the Amazon basin, from January to July, the area enjoys particularly heavy rainfall – five times more than most deserts. Meanwhile, with little wind and high humidity, the dunes themselves hardly move during this time. The result is a natural phenomenon, where the spaces between the dunes form three-metre (10-foot) lagoons, blue and green as far as the eye can see.

While kayaking and paddle-boarding the Rio Preguiças gives an up-close appreciation of the mangroves, from Barreirinhas you can hop aboard a flight to take in the true scope of the national park. From above, the eternally shifting dunes and lagoons take on an entirely different character; like a work of art or mandala.

81

THE GRAND CANYON

Whether you hike, raft or walk the skywalk, the USA's Grand Canyon must be on your bucket list

Jutting from the badlands of Arizona, America's Grand Canyon is almost two kilometres (one mile) deep. Sculpted by the Colorado River into four plateaus, it's almost 450 kilometres (280 miles) long and, at points, 29 kilometres (18 miles) wide, offering a unique cross-section of 40 layers of the Earth's crust.

The park's South Rim is a gateway to the canyon's multicoloured walls. Shoshone Point is a short walk from the parking areas, but quiet even on the busiest summer day. For the crowd-averse, a better campground is Ten-X, obscured by the Kaibab National Forest. Meanwhile, the West Rim, on Hualapai Indian Tribal Lands, is home to the Skywalk – a glass-bottomed platform jutting out over the canyon, allowing for dizzyingly unimpeded panoramic views.

Arguably, the most atmospheric entry point is the North Rim, which receives just one-tenth of the park's visitors. Adventurers who dare to drive the extra distance are rewarded with a stay at the stone and wood Grand Canyon Lodge, or a night under the stars at the northern campground. Hardened hikers can ramble the distance. The 34-kilometre (21-mile) trek cuts through the Bright Angel Trail, down to the bottom of the canyon, before climbing up the North Kaibab Trail. Though the summer sun is unforgiving, the canyon's Indian Gardens offer reprieve, with an oasis of creeks, cottonwood trees and willows.

Though much of the park is closed in winter, there are few sights as picturesque as snow settling over the canyon. Some trails, such as the Cathedral Wash near the historic Lee's Ferry, are totally isolated. Regardless of the season, trekkers are advised to obtain a Backcountry Permit for camping. While most lodges get booked up far in advance, the tiny Phantom Ranch, nestled near the Colorado River, requires guests to enter a lottery 15 months in advance.

As immersive as the canyon's many hikes are, for adrenaline addicts, no trip is complete without white water rafting. The canyon's dogged Lava Falls is one of the most notorious rapids in the world. There's a range of ways to experience the thunderous straights – from a three-day tour of the tamer lower rapids, to a three-week odyssey around the most notorious bends.

Beyond the white-water dance, the Colorado River harbours a network of quiet creeks, limestone cliffs, hidden ruins and cactus gardens, waiting to be explored by motorised raft, oar or dory. While the river can be fierce, the solitude of its labyrinthine caves, hidden waterfalls and sandy beaches is just as powerful.

Since 1887, the landlubber's favourite mode of transport has been the trusty mule ride. These are perfect for the risk-averse adventurer, with a slow and steady journey down into the belly of the beast. A happy medium can be found aboard the high-octane jeep tours of the canyon's greatest hits: historic stagecoach trails, the wildlife-rich Kaibab Forest and sunset over the canyon. Visitors soak in the ancient Native American cave paintings, walk with the elk and visit the historic sights – except with less filler.

To truly experience the canyon, you must view it from up close and afar. No visit is complete, then, without a bird's-eye view, courtesy of a plane or helicopter ride. These swoop over not just the canyon, but Monument Valley, Rainbow Bridge, Antelope Canyon and Lake Powell.

Arizona's Grand Canyon is vast and should be explored both on the ground and from the air to be fully appreciated

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Preparation is crucial. Book campsites and accommodation well in advance, and obtain a camping permit.

Best time to visit:

September and October (for a more peaceful experience)

Time zone:

UTC-7

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/backcountry-permit.htm
www.grandcanyonwest.com
www.wildlandtrekking.com/grand-canyon/hiking-tours.html

82 AMAZON RAINFOREST

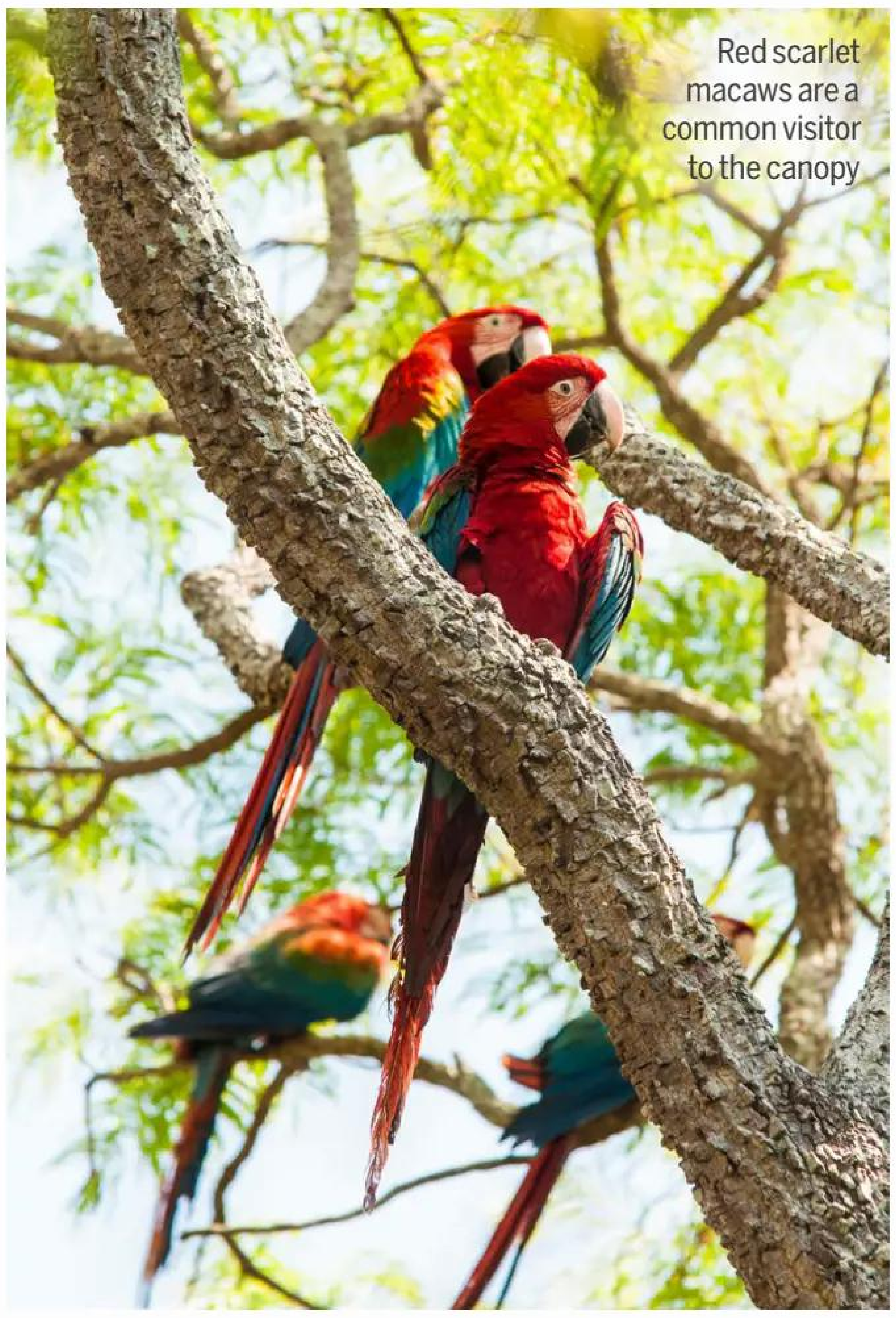
Delve in the jungle, swim with pink dolphins and chase after jaguars in the world's largest rainforest

One of the most direct and rewarding ways to enter the Amazon is by lightweight aircraft. Nothing prepares you for the sight of flying over the rainforest or the abundance of life that spans beneath you. It's enough to take your breath away – ironic, given that the Amazon is often referred to as 'the lungs of the Earth' because the abundance of vegetation accounts for 20 per cent of Earth's oxygen.

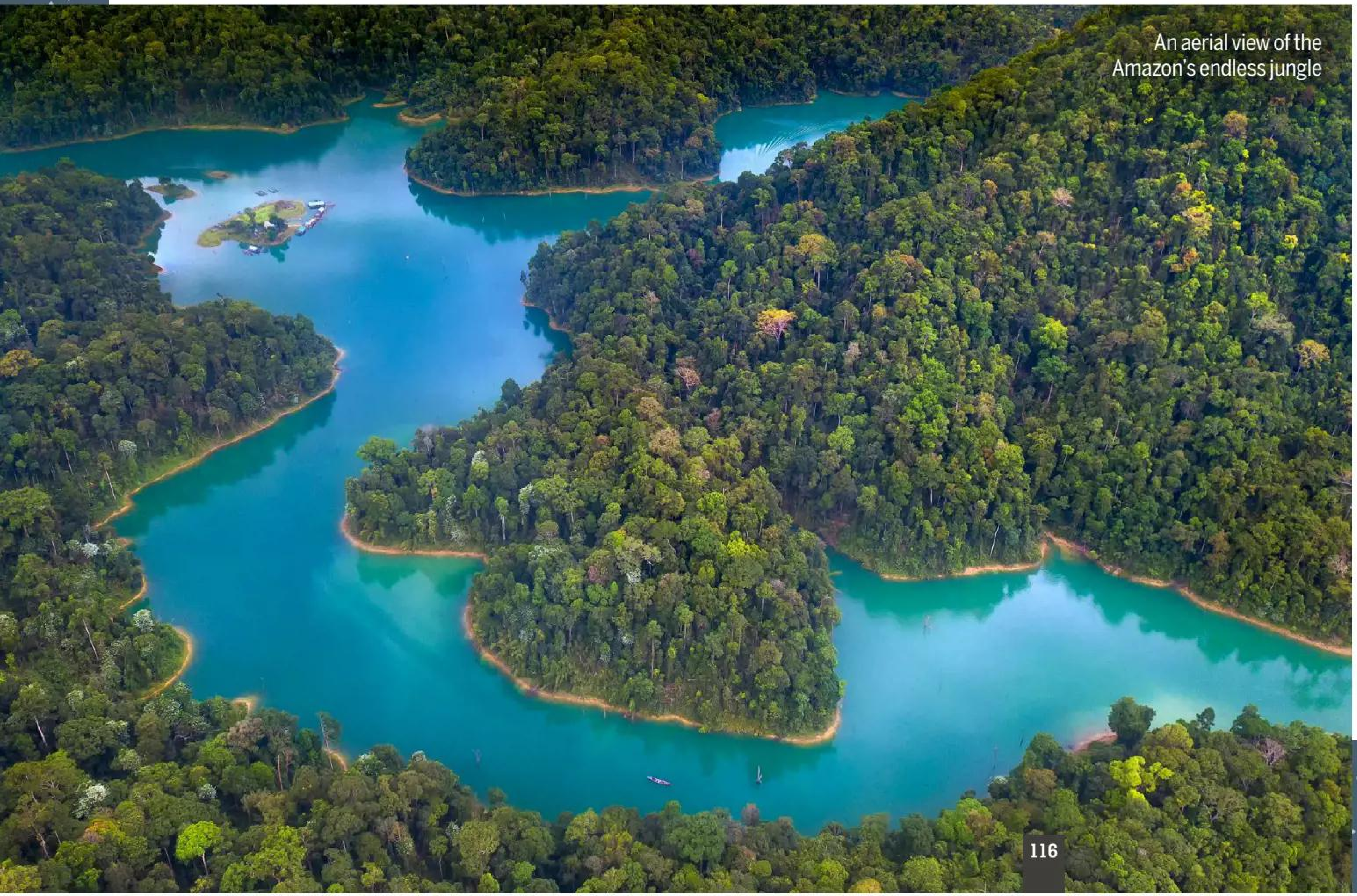
The world's largest rainforest spans a jaw-dropping 5.5 million square kilometres (2.5 million square miles), with the Amazon River meandering through it for more than 6,000 kilometres (4,000 miles). Different sources give different measurements for the river, but while we know the Amazon is shorter than the River Nile, it still spans over nine countries across the space of Latin America.

With the Amazon rainforest covering such a vast space, there is no wonder why this is home to more than 30,000 plant species, 1,800 fish, 1,300 bird species, 311 mammals and 165 types of amphibian. However, arriving at the Amazon basin is tricky. This is mostly due to the fact that the main river flows through Brazil, Colombia and Peru, so it's impossible to know where you will have the best experience and see the most wildlife. As the river meanders, it also changes in character. In Brazil, it is called the Solimões, and in Peru it is the Marañón. Different countries offer alternative experiences – for example, in Brazil you are most likely to dance the samba and experience the anthropological side of rainforest life. In some areas, such as Emberá of Brazil, you can also find many indigenous tribes living in the forest, who are also fighting against deforestation to preserve their homes and all the species with whom they share it. If you are after this sort of trip, then head to Manaus, which is the express route into the jungle. However, don't be surprised if your tour is crowded because this is a common route in for 'gringos'. If crowds aren't your thing, then why not take the road less travelled and head to either Peru, Ecuador or Bolivia. The Bolivian side of the Amazon is worth bearing in mind if you are planning on travelling on a budget, as this is usually the cheaper option with regards to tour operators.

The emperor tamarin lives in the southwest Amazon basin, along with many other animals


Red scarlet macaws are a common visitor to the canopy

It spans over nine countries across the space of Latin America


An aerial view of the Amazon's endless jungle

When travelling in from Bolivia, it's best to fly to Rurrenabaque. This petite jungle town serves as the gateway for any of the tours visiting Madidi National Park or the rich Pampas region – famous for its pink dolphins. Alternatively, if your pocket won't stretch as far as a cost of a flight, there is a 16-hour bus ride that runs from La Paz for less than £8/$11 one way. Bear in mind that it is exceptionally cheap for a reason – most of these roads are unpaved and bumpy, so it's not a journey for the faint hearted! Rurrenabaque is worth exploring before heading off into the rainforest, with its affordable hostels and down-to-earth bars.

Any excursion, be it the Pampas tour or the Madidi, will begin by setting off on a long boat down the legendary river into the heart of the rainforest. A popular option for travellers is the three-day Pampas tour, which is ideal for those

Delve head-first into the jungle from Rurrenabaque

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

If visiting the Bolivian jungle from Rurrenabaque, bring plenty of cash as there are no ATMs.

Best time to visit:
All year round

Time zone:
UTC-4

CURRENCY
VARIES

Useful sites:
www.madidijungle.com
www.perujungle.com
www.amazon-rainforest-tours.org/en

interested in spotting wildlife, swimming with rare pink dolphins and hiking through vegetation.

Also departing from Rurrenabaque are tours to Madidi National Park – a site that is world-famous for its diversity. This jungle is incredibly dense, so it can be tricky to spot wildlife even though it undoubtedly can be heard all around you. Jaguars, crocodile, tapir, boar and the giant cane toad are just a few of the species that are known to grace the area.

While visiting the Amazon, consider embarking on a night tour. This is when the nocturnal jungle comes alive. During a night walk, your guide will usually lead you only by torch light and will often encourage head torches to be turned off to really experience the sounds of the jungle choir. Another great way to experience the rhythm of the jungle is by boat or kayak. Why not take part in a kayak expedition from Ecuador? Begin in Quito and paddle down the river through indigenous Huaorani territory and camp overnight in the epicentre of the jungle.

The Amazon is without a doubt a place that needs to be ticked off any bucket list. Yet sadly, WWF estimates that if the current rate of deforestation continues, more than a quarter of the Amazon biome will be without trees by 2030. This means that there is no better time to visit the Amazon than now – just make sure you pack lots of bug spray!

The famous pink dolphins on the Pampas tour

83

The Amazon River

The Amazon River, also known as the Rio Amazonas, Río Marañón and Rio Solimões, is the greatest river of South America. The river runs through many of the countries of South America, including Guyana, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Peru. The total length of the river is at least 6,000 kilometres (4,000 miles), which is the equivalent of the distance between Rome and New York. Between June and October every year, the Amazon River overflows, and water levels can rise between nine and 13 metres (30 and 43 feet). The main reason for this is due to the main source of water originating from Andean ice melt. In turn, this paired with extensive rain floods parts of the rainforest bank and creates varzeas or 'flooded forests'. More than 3,000 species of fish call this river home, including catfish, piranha and electric eel. Occasionally, one of the largest snakes in the world, the anaconda, lurk in the shallow waters waiting to attack mammals as they move closer to the water to drink. Certainly think twice before going for a dip in here!

84

ARENAL VOLCANO

One of the most visited sites in Costa Rica

Although currently in a resting phase, Arenal Volcano, located in northwestern Costa Rica, still resides as one of the most visited sites of the country. Standing at 1,670 metres (5,479 feet) it was, until 2010, noted the most active volcano in Costa Rica with an average of 41 eruptions per day. Even though activity at Arenal has become restricted to puffs of smoke and a few deep trembles, the volcano and the jungle that fringes it are still alluring and brimming with life. The cone-shaped volcano dominates the fertile landscape of Arenal Volcano National Park, and while you cannot embark on a hike up the volcano itself, there are still plenty of opportunities to witness the old lava flow and the abundance of Costa Rican wildlife.

If hiking is what you're after, it's best to book a tour guide. Most guides are bilingual and will take you through the rainforest canopy, identifying species that are native to Costa Rica. Great news for bird enthusiasts: over 50 per cent of Costa Rican bird life inhabits Arenal National Park, which makes it a great spot for bird watchers. Keep an eye out for keel-billed toucans, the great green macaw and many varieties of motmot.

If you are looking for a bit more relaxation, then you've come to the right place, as Arenal is home to several hot springs that you can soak your muscles in. These hot springs are formed when water is warmed underneath the ground forming bubbles on the surface. The hot springs can be used to treat rheumatism and other ailments. If you are more of an adrenaline junky, then why not zipline through the jungle canopy and view the volcano from up high? From the zipline there are incredible views overlooking the forest canopy, Arenal Volcano, Lake Arenal and the Talamanca mountain range.

If you're not afraid of the dark – or creepy crawlies – then a night walk through Arenal is a great excursion. Grab your head torch and take a guided tour into the nocturnal jungle, and notice how many pairs of yellow eyes are reflected back at you. Red-eyed tree frogs, sloths and jaguars are a few of the many creatures that you can look for on your adventure.

Another noteworthy excursion to consider when visiting Arenal Volcano is to venture to the beautiful waterfall of Cataratas Fortuna. Nestled just outside the town of La Fortuna, the 60-metre (200-foot) waterfall is a great place for a swim and to appreciate the enchantment of the thick jungle before diving into the blue-green pool. You can reach the fall either by foot or on horseback.

When planning a trip here, try to set aside a few days to fully explore Arenal National Park, as there are endless activities to partake in here.

Arenal Volcano is the youngest and one of the most active stratovolcanoes in Costa Rica

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

At night, look out for fireflies dancing in the moonlight of the national park.

Best time to visit:

December to April

Time zone:

UTC-6

CURRENCY

₡

COSTA RICAN COLÓN

Useful sites:

www.arenalnatura.com/tours-en/night-walk/
www-origin.arenal.net/arenal-volcano-national-park
www.arenalobservatorylodge.com/arenal-volcano-national-park

85 NIAGARA FALLS

Experience awesome power at North America's iconic natural water feature

There are few international borders as impressive as this one. Niagara Falls marks the boundary between the American state of New York and the Canadian province of Ontario – at least, partly. Niagara Falls is actually three distinct waterfalls: Horseshoe Falls bisects the USA-Canada border, while American Falls and the much smaller Bridal Veil Falls lie entirely on the United States' side. The three waterfalls, with Goat Island and Luna Island separating them, all lie in the Niagara River. Unlike elsewhere on the border, here anything to the west of the river is Canada and anything to the east is the United States.

On average, 2,400 cubic metres of water flows over Horseshoe Falls – the biggest of the three – every second. However, that figure varies depending on the season and the time of day. In late spring and early summer, when Lake Erie is at its highest, water flow reaches a peak – the maximum ever recorded was 6,400 cubic metres every second. During the winter and at night, when water is diverted to hydroelectric power plants, the flow may drop as low as 1,400 cubic metres per second.

It's no surprise that visitor numbers peak in the summer months too, flooding to walkways along Prospect Point Park with cameras clicking in an attempt to capture the majestic sight of water cascading over the precipice in front of them – don't forget to take a long-exposure shot for a silky-smooth waterscape. Goat Island offers more excellent views of the falls and is accessible by foot and car by a bridge over American Falls.

Try to take a trip on the Maid of the Mist – a 20-minute boat cruise that has carried passengers into the rapids immediately below the falls since 1846. The plastic ponchos provided by the crew are a must, since the boat's name is very apt – expect to get thoroughly covered in the spray from the falls – but there is no better way to experience the 51-metre (167-foot) height of Horseshoe Falls than bobbing at the bottom and looking up.

The other side of the river offers the opposite perspective. The Skylon Tower, in the Canadian town of Niagara Falls, rises 158 metres (518 feet) above the ground, and looks over the waterfall drop. Take in the view from the observation platform or enjoy a slow lunch or dinner in one of two restaurants as the room slowly rotates.

That's the viewpoints from the front, above and below sorted, but what about from behind? The Journey Behind the Falls attraction allows people to enter a series of remarkable tunnels dug into the rock and peer at the waterfalls from sheltered cave entrances that open out onto the falls. Again, expect to get wet!

With several other ways to gain a new perspective on the falls – helicopter, skywheel or zipwire – Niagara Falls caters for every kind of adventurous visitor. Just don't expect to follow in the footsteps of Charles Blondin, who liked to walk across the waterfalls on a tightrope in the 1850s, once even stopping to cook and eat an omelette in the middle!

The Maid of the Mist has been dunking tourists underneath the waterfalls since 1846

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Carry a passport and expect a short queue if you wish to cross the border.

Best time to visit:
June to August (when water flow is greatest)

Time zone:
UTC-5

CURRENCY
$
US/CANADIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites:
www.niagarafallsstatepark.com
www.niagarafallstourism.com
www.niagaraparks.com

86 NEW YORK CITY

Scale up for your next city break and explore the Big Apple

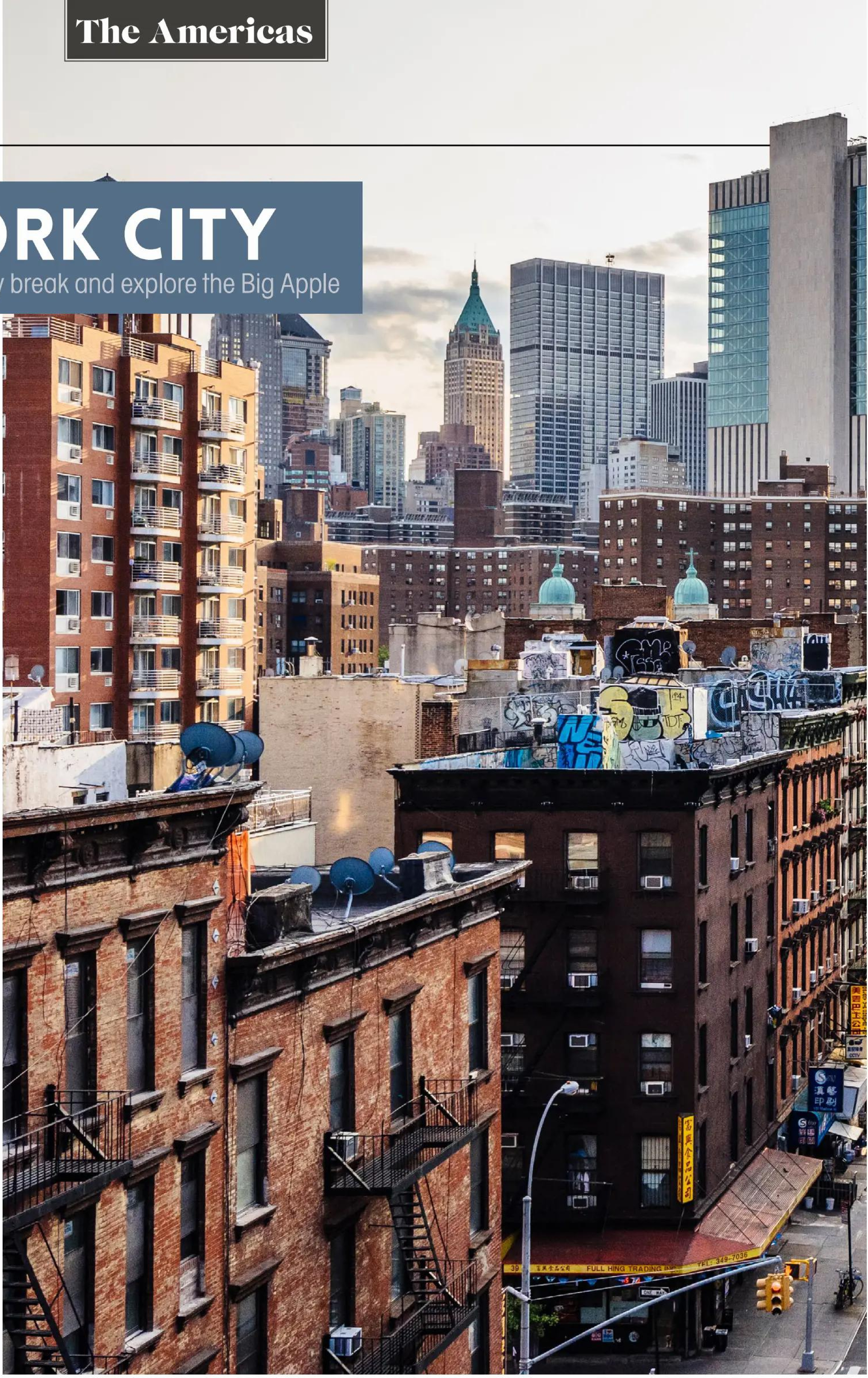
Set off on an adventure to the city that never sleeps! New York has it all: great food, sensational theatre shows, the best shops, impressive tourist attractions, art, culture, history and so much more.

The city is huge, so the open-top bus tours are actually very good and extremely worthwhile. The City Sightseeing Hop-On Hop-Off tour is particularly good, as you'll be able to get off whenever you get to an attraction you want to explore. There's more than one route so it's best to get a ticket that you can use over a few days. Plus, the four-day ticket gives you free admission to either the Empire State Building or Top of the Rock, so ends up being very worth the money. One of the best and most memorable things about the tour is getting to ride across the Brooklyn Bridge with a view of the Manhattan Bridge on the Brooklyn route of the tour. There is also a night tour that takes you across the river and gives you stunning views of a glittering New York skyline.

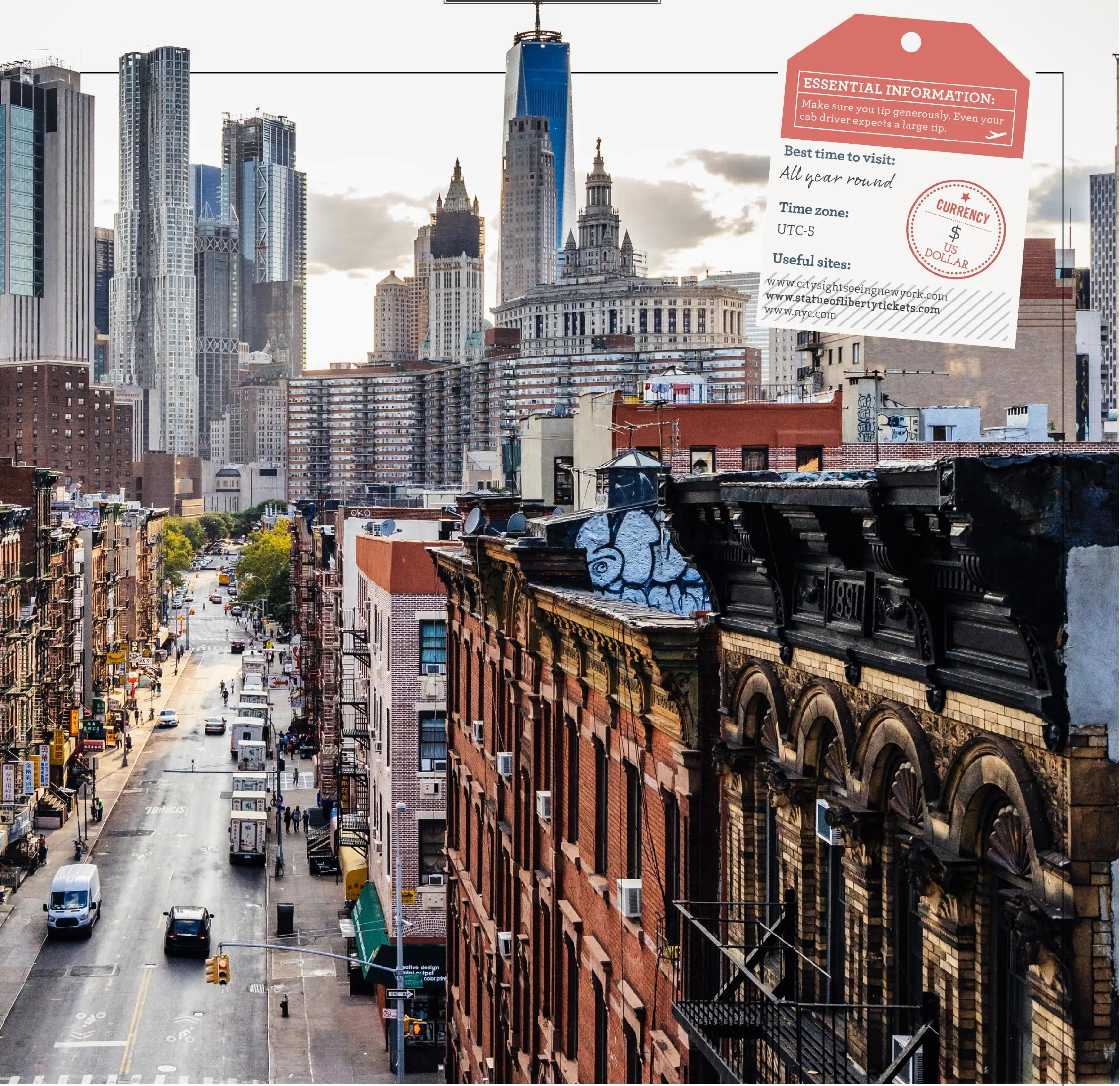
If you climb up the iconic Empire State building located in midtown Manhattan, the observation decks on the 86th and 102nd floors provide visitors with a breathtaking 360-degree view of the city. The main deck on the 86th floor (the highest open-air observatory in New York until 2015) will give you amazing views of Central Park, Brooklyn Bridge, Statue of Liberty and much more. On the 102nd floor, on a clear day, you'll be able to see skyscrapers up to 80 miles away. Even the lobby of the building will take your breath away; the Art Deco murals on the ceiling are a particular highlight. Before you get to the open-air observatory, make sure you visit the 80th floor and discover all there is to know about the famous building's history.

If you only have time for one tall building, make it Top of the Rock in the Rockefeller Center. When you picture the New York skyline you'll most likely see the Empire State Building, and venturing up to the Top of the Rock viewing platform gives you that iconic view. There are three observation decks: one with a gift shop, one that is completely indoors, and one on the 70th floor that is an open-air roof deck free of glass, making it the perfect place for taking pictures of the Empire State Building.

The tragedy of 9/11 is hard to ignore when you are in New York. You can pay your respects to the victims when visiting the memorial at Ground Zero. You can either opt for a specific tour of the site, or take in the memorial on your own. The names of every single person killed in the attack on 11 September 2001 and the 26 February



Take in nature from within the city



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
Make sure you tip generously. Even your cab driver expects a large tip.

Best time to visit:
All year round

Time zone:
UTC-5

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

Useful sites:
www.citysightseeingnewyork.com
www.statueoflibertytickets.com
www.nyc.com

1993 bombing are etched into the bronze that surrounds two memorial pools. You can learn about the Callery pear tree that became known as the survivor tree after being damaged in the attack on 9/11 and nursed back to life.

Enjoy a swathe of greenery amidst the buzz of the city in Central Park. You'll be surprised at just how much there is to do and see tucked away and surrounded by green meadows, gardens and vast bodies of water. There's music, education, and performance centres.

Visit Strawberry Fields, which is an area of the park that pays tribute to the late John Lennon and is a designated quiet zone for reflection. It's located near Central Park West between 71st and 74th Street. You'll find the famous 'Imagine' mosaic on the ground in the centre of Strawberry Fields. Balto the sled dog statue is a popular attraction in the park, too. Accepting hugs and rides from passers by, he stands near the Tisch Children's Zoo. Another cherished sculpture in

> The Top of the Rock viewing platform gives you an iconic view

Seek out the best food that the city has to offer

the park is a depiction of *Alice in Wonderland*, which is based on the original illustrations by John Tenniel. One of the most famous and popular attractions in the park is the Central Park Carousel, which has remained popular since it opened in 1871, and features 57 beautiful horses that you can take a ride on for an exciting three and a half minutes.

The best way to explore the quirky collection of attractions in Central Park is to hop on a bike or join one of the many tours. Choose a classic mode of transport for seeing the park and climb aboard a horse and carriage to embark on either a private or shared tour. For a truly romantic experience, some operators will add flowers and chocolates to the carriage ride for your loved one. There are also walking, bike, pedicab, running and photo tours.

While you are in Central Park, don't forget to visit the Central Park Zoo. Just metres away from the famous 5th Avenue you can discover more than 130 different species, including red pandas, penguins, snow leopards and more. The zoo's five acres are split into sections mimicking the animals' natural habitats.

Even if you don't plan to spend your savings on designer gear, you should still take at least a walk down the iconic Fifth Avenue, as it is considered one of the most expensive and elegant streets in the world. Situated in the borough of Manhattan, you'll find shops like Abercrombie & Fitch, Armani, Gucci, and of course Tiffany & Co. Maybe you can persuade your travel companion to buy you something nice!

Making time for a musical or play on Broadway is a must. Securing a ticket can be difficult and expensive, but it is worth the trouble. Long-running shows include *Hamilton*, *Wicked*, *The Jersey Boys*, *The Lion King* and many more. If you don't want to commit to tickets before you get there, or just can't get hold of any, head to one of the TKTS booths and queue to get last-minute tickets on the day. You'll be able to choose from a range of Broadway and Off-Broadway shows, and tickets will generally be at a discounted price.

There is no shortage of art and culture in NYC. Experience art from Vincent van Gogh, Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol and many more at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) near Fifth Avenue. The MoMA is often referred to as one of the largest and most influential museums

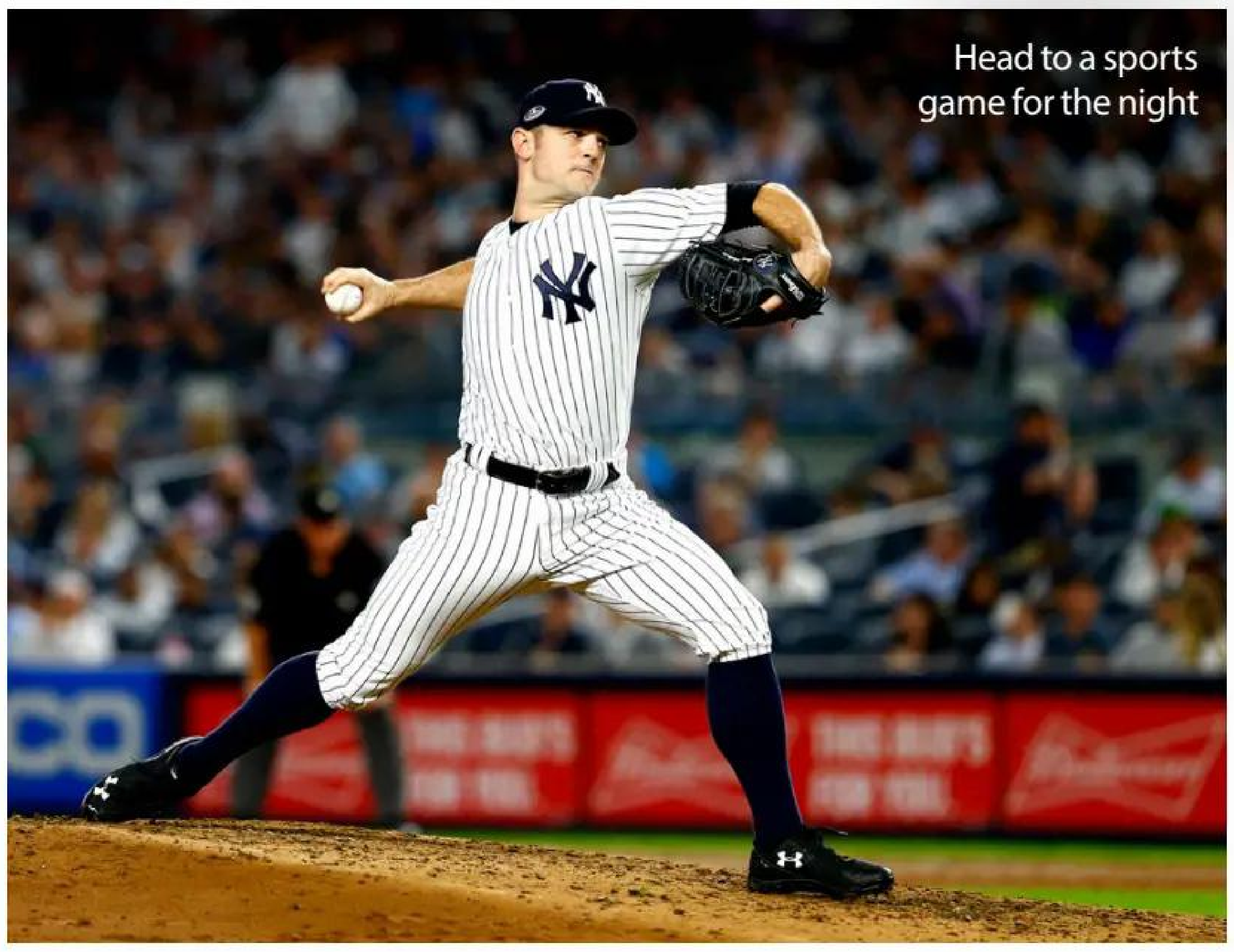
87

The Statue of Liberty

It pretty much goes without saying that you should make time to see the Statue of Liberty. For a great view and photo opportunity, take a trip for free on the Staten Island Ferry. It departs from the Whitehall Terminal in Manhattan to St George Terminal on Staten Island, and you'll get the most amazing view of the New York City skyline from the Hudson River, with the Statue of Liberty providing a spectacular focal point. Once you get to Staten Island, you can either get off and take the time to explore, or instantly board again for the return journey. Highlights include the Children's Museum, Historic Richmond Town, Staten Island Zoo and Fort Wadsworth.

To get up close and personal, head out to Liberty Island and Ellis Island. You can purchase a ticket that gives you ferry transportation to both, plus entry to the Immigration Museum on Ellis Island and the chance to reserve pedestal access to the statue itself, or upgrade to crown access too. Crown tours sell out weeks in advance, so make sure you book your spot before you head off on your trip to the Big Apple.

Explore the red-bricked buildings of Brooklyn and the Manhattan Bridge



Head to a sports game for the night

of modern art in the world, and contains a collection that spans across six floors.

The Guggenheim Museum is located on Fifth Avenue, and its striking architecture is hard to miss. It hosts an increasingly expanding number of Impressionist, early modern and contemporary art pieces. Elsewhere, you can learn something new at the American Museum of Natural History, which is located in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and is one of the largest museums in the world. It's known for its impressive exhibitions and scientific collections, which help in the learning and understanding of the planet's history and its many cultures.

Another place worth visiting, even if just to walk through it, is Grand Central Station. You'll recognise it from a lot of Hollywood blockbusters, and it's a great place to people-watch. Walk up the steps used in the famous pram scene in *The Untouchables*, and watch people meet at the famous clock in the centre of the concourse.

Venture to Harlem and soak up the African-American culture that is synonymous with the area. Here you'll find the famous Apollo Theatre, which opened back in 1934 and has been the stage where global artists burst onto the scene, including The Jackson 5 and James Brown. To get the most out of Harlem, you should seek out an experienced guide to show you around the streets, churches, restaurants, theatres and historic homes. There are various tours on offer, such as Harlem Historic Tours, Harlem Your Way, Hush Hip Tours and Taste of Harlem food and culture tours.

To experience the real New York, take a trip to Brooklyn. It's full of some of the most interesting and historic neighbourhoods in NYC, as well as awesome food, drink and entertainment, not to mention stunning river views. Discover first hand the charm of Prospect Park, and enjoy family-friendly activities like horse riding and ice skating. No tourist should leave Brooklyn without visiting the Brooklyn Museum, which is one of the oldest and biggest art museums in the world

Be a true New Yorker for the day and head to a sporting event – sports fans in New York take it very seriously, so embrace the energy and excitement of a fast-paced game. Enjoy a basketball match and choose whether to support the Brooklyn Nets or the rival New York Knicks. Or if American football is more your thing, choose between the Giants or the Jets. And if that's not for you, then why not cheer for the New York Yankees in a thrilling baseball game? There is no shortage of exciting sporting events in New York, so keep an eye out for discounted tickets online before you go.

Indulge yourself on the best food that New York has to offer. New York bagels are considered the best in the world, so visit Murray's Bagels or Absolute Bagels for a tasty hand-crafted NYC bagel with a firm, crunchy exterior and chewy interior. Ordering pastrami on rye for lunch is about as New York as you can get, so hunt down Katz's Delicatessen for a sandwich stacked high with meat.

Another local must-have is a dollar slice, a cheap but tasty meal of a slice of pizza to go. There are hundreds of takeaways offering this, but 2 Bros. Pizza and 99 Cent Fresh Pizza are the tastiest. If you want more than a slice though, seek out Lombardi's, which was the first pizzeria in the US, for incredible city-style pizza.

If you have a sweet tooth, try a New York cheesecake at Junior's. Be warned, though, no other cheesecake will live up to its greatness!

With so much to see and do in New York, there really is something for everyone to enjoy.

88

Times Square

Take in the buzz of Times Square. Also known as 'the Crossroads of the World' it's an iconic intersection filled with bright billboards in the heart of the theatre district. Times Square is one of the most visited tourist attractions in the world, with a staggering 50 million visitors every year. No matter the time of day, it is filled with a constant flow of pedestrians. It is situated in midtown Manhattan at the junction of Broadway and 7th Avenue and spans from West 42nd to West 47th street. The Times building in the square gives it its name, and is the location of the legendary New Year's Eve Ball Drop. Make sure you look out for the Naked Cowboy who serenades passers by, or head over to M&Ms World for some tasty sweet treats. Times Square is one of the best places in the city to people-watch, so grab a seat in the Pedestrian Zone or climb the TKTS steps to take in the pulsing energy that surrounds you.

A perfect storm (pun intended) of meteorological conditions occur at the mouth of the Catatumbo River to form perpetual lightning

© Alamy

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Be aware of Venzuela's current economic crisis.

Best time to visit:

Wet season (May to October)

CURRENCY
Bs
VENEZUELA BOLIVAR

Time zone:

UTC-4

Useful sites:

www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/venezuela
www.araguato.org/en/node/175
angel-ecotours.com/destinations/western-venezuela/catatumbo-river-maracaibo-lake-lightning-tour

DO NOT TRAVEL
See p.4 for more information

89

CATATUMBO LIGHTNING

The place in Venezuela where lightning never strikes the same spot a thousand times

There's nothing quite as awe-inspiring as the full force of a thunderstorm, and the tropics tend to do them particularly well. But if you're seeking night after night of natural light shows, you should put the western side of Venezuela on your bucket list. Here, where the Catatumbo River empties into Lake Maracaibo, the planets have aligned – or rather, a perfect storm of the elements have come together to provide almost perpetual lightning over the lake. 'Almost' perpetual because it's not actually continually firing – just for around ten hours a day for half the days of the year, and that's only been happening for the last few centuries of recorded history. It went through a lull in early 2010, when there was no lightning at all for a couple of months, and everyone thought climate change had finally put this spectacle to sleep.

The reason it happens is thought to be threefold: warm and moist air sweeps across the lake and hits the cold air coming from the Andes mountains, which surround the region. It's a natural crucible for thunderstorm creation, but then methane from the swampy plains acts as a catalyst to increase the likelihood of lightning – and that's it for the science.

The result is a better light show than anything you're ever likely to see, which is obviously far more dramatic at night. If you find yourself a viewing spot away from sources of light pollution, you might also get a spectacular cosmic backdrop. If you're a keen photographer, long-exposure can bring out the ferocity of a thunderstorm contrasted with the serenity of the Milky Way.

But, as is sadly the case with many sights on an international jetsetter's bucket list, Venezuela is not the most accessible or the safest of countries to visit, especially at the moment. In 2014, the country experienced its worst recession in recent history, and while it has recently started to recover slowly, for years hyperinflation devalued the Bolivar to the point where it was almost worthless and the country is still suffering from extreme poverty. Venezuela already has a history of kidnappings and violence, and the current economic climate just makes it more likely for tourists to be robbed, so be mindful of this if you're planning a trip.

If you're going to travel safely through Venezuela to see Catatumbo lightning, then you should definitely book a tour via a reputable organisation, and make sure you do your homework before you leave. Perhaps stay in the nearby city of Mérida, and combine your night-time light show with daytime sights of river dolphins, monkeys and local flora on the Catatumbo River. Perhaps even explore some of the nearby Andean villages. It might be that you'd prefer to place Catatumbo further down your bucket list for now, and wait until the situation settles down, but it is a truly unique experience.

90 LAKE TITICACA

A vast lake worthy of diving into, the birthplace of the Sun and a humble culture built on reeds

The largest lake in South America and, according to Andean belief, the birthplace of the Sun, Lake Titicaca sits nestled between Bolivia and Peru. The endless blue lake is home to many local farmers who still harvest the land by hand without the use of industrial equipment. Most of the attraction to the lake is due to local indigenous cultures still calling it a home. Locals wear sandals made from recycled tyre trucks, call llamas pets, and invite you to visit their floating islands made from straw. One of the common appeals to visiting this lake is the latter – the islands of straw – the Islas Uros. This chain of buoyant islands are hand-woven by totora reeds, a tradition taught by Andean ancestors who sought refuge from the Inca Empire here. These reeds are partially edible and used by Uros tribes to build homes, boats, toys and crafts. Today, each island is home to one to ten Uros families, who now use the ancient tradition of weaving totora reeds as a means of attracting tourists to their hand-built homes.

Most tours to the floating islands begin from the boat dock in Puno, where you can begin a two-hour tour by boat to explore the mysterious culture. Look out for the totora horses, the local way of navigating the waterways – these boats float gracefully on the waters of the lake, and are also made out of the malleable totora reeds. Another key attraction for tourists visiting the lake is the Island Taquile. The island is famous for its textiles and, in particular, its weaving and knitting. Taquile can be reached by a 90-minute boat ride. The island is inhabited by 3,000 Quechua-speaking Taquilenos, who run their community on the Inca moral code of 'do not steal, do not lie, and do not be lazy'. Keep an eye out for the homemade knitted hats that the local men wear. These hats represent key stages of life – a white segment means that a man is single, while a red hat identifies that he is married. If you have a bit of time to spare and fancy immersing yourself further into the culture, then why not consider a homestay in Taquille? Although accommodation and food are basic here, you can expect cultural enrichment and a taste of local living. If you are travelling from Bolivia, then the island of Anapia might be more suited. This island is more isolated and less-known to travellers, so you can expect more of an authentic experience to the indigenous culture.

Sandwiched between Bolivia and Peru, Lake Titicaca is an unmissable stop for any South American journey.

The picturesque view of Islas Uros and its iconic floating islands

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Don't forget your yellow fever certificate if visiting the Bolivian side of the lake.

Best time to visit:

May to October

Time zone:

UTC-5 (Peru)
UTC-4 (Bolivia)

CURRENCY

S/./$b
SOL/BOLIVIAN BOLÍVIANO

Useful sites:

www.cruzdelsur.com.pe
www.boliviahop.com
www.peruhop.com/tours/lake-titicaca

91 MACHU PICCHU

Grab your hiking boots and your camera and marvel at the iconic landmark of Peru

Machu Picchu is a historical site that many people consider the trademark stamp of Peru. Machu Picchu stands in all its glory at an elevation of 2,350 metres (7,710 feet). Granted a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, the site of ancient Inca ruins is located 80 kilometres (50 miles) northwest of Cuzco, in the Cordillera de Vilcabamba of the Andes Mountains. Nestled above the Urubamba River between two steep peaks of Machu Picchu (old peak) and the Huayna Picchu (new peak), this ancient city laid undiscovered to the West until the early part of the 20th century, when it was uncovered by Yale University professor Hiram Bingham in 1911 on an excursion by a local Quechua-speaking resident. Bingham had been in search of the 'lost city of the Incas'.

Now, the site is a famous archaeological maze that is commonly reached by tourists along the iconic Inca Trail. Each year, 75,000 people flock to the path in search of the Sacred Valley. The world-famous trek in South America is 42 kilometres (26 miles) long, and covers lush cloud forests, subtropical jungle, endless mountain views and Inca-paved ruins. However, sadly, due to an increase in tourism this route has become well-trodden and today the park limits it to only 500 people per day to control the damage to the ecosystem. Bearing this in mind, it's worth checking out more sustainable and less congested routes up to the famous view. One of these options is the five-to-eight-day hike on the Salkantay Route through the mountains on the outskirts of Machu Picchu. If hiking is how you plan on reaching the panoramic view, then it's important to consider training in order to prepare your body for the physical demands of the hike. The high altitude and steep climbs can cause havoc on people uncustomed to it. Altitude sickness is a common problem and is caused by rapid exposure to low amounts of oxygen at high elevation. Some of the symptoms of this can include headaches, vomiting and dizziness – all of which are not ideal when climbing up mountains. In order to try and prevent this from happening, it's best to put in some aerobic

Marvel at the iconic view of Machu Picchu

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Don't forget your passport when purchasing permits, as it is required to secure your booking.

Best time to visit:

The Inca Trail is closed for maintenance in February

Time zone:

UTC-5

CURRENCY

S/.
SOL

Useful sites:

www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk
www.ticketmachupicchu.com
www.incatrailperu.com

Embark on the road less travelled and hike up the Salkantay Route

Llamas are iconic visitors to the mountain, and have grown accustomed to living on the steep incline

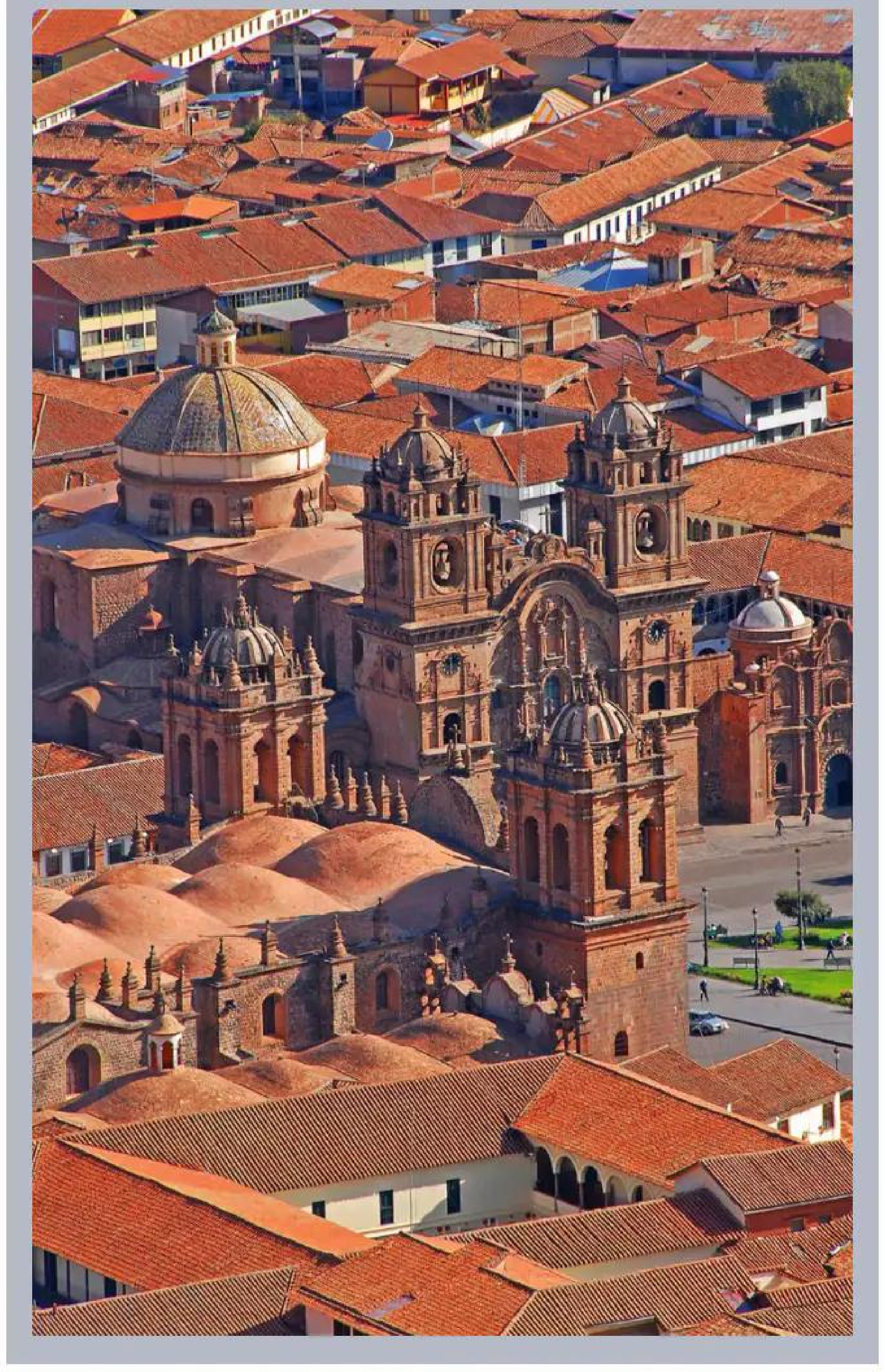
Consider stopping off at the famous city of Cuzco

training beforehand, as well as partaking in local incline walks to help with building up strength in the legs. You might also want to consider stopping off at the famous city of Cuzco to allow your body to gradually get used to the altitude before embarking on your hike.

If you are short on time, then there are alternative routes to the top of the famous ruins, which avoid physical exertion and even breaking a sweat! Machu Picchu can be reached and explored within a day. During high season, which runs from May to September, it's imperative that day tickets are booked in advance as there is a limit of 2,500 permits per day that often sell out days before. These permits can be purchased from Dirección Desconcentrada de Cultura Cuzco via its website, or at the official office in Cuzco. The easiest way to reach the ruins is by train from the neighbouring station in Cuzco of Poroy, which runs directly to the small Andean town of Aguas Calientes. Once again, due to popular demand, it is best to book these train tickets in advance from Peru Rail or Inca Rail. To avoid missing out on a full day up at Machu Picchu, it is recommended that you reach Aguas Calientes the day before, as this gives you the opportunity to reach the summit by sunrise. From Aguas Calientes, buses run from as early as 5.30am, and it's a 25-minute ride up the side of the mountain to the site. If you are up for a challenge, there is an eight-kilometre (five-mile) hike up a steep mountainside path. It is only once reaching the top that you realise the full scale of the archaeological site. Upon reaching the summit, don't miss out on visiting the Sun Gate, or the Inti Punku. This is considered one of the primary features of Machu Picchu, and from the top it boasts a panoramic view of the lost city. The stairs leading here are believed to have been the entry and exit point of those visiting the city. If you are up here early enough, head here for sunrise as it is a view that is not to be missed. However, the best view of Machu Picchu is from Huayna Picchu. This is reached by a steep trek and some scrambling, but doesn't require any climbing tools. Children over the age of 12 are allowed to climb the mountain, which is great news if you are travelling with children, as you can all marvel at the view of the citadel and the surrounding landscape together. Other noteworthy sites include the Inca Bridge, Watchman's Hut, the Funerary Stone, Temple of the Sun and the Royal Tomb of the Palace of the Princess. With so much to see, make sure you leave plenty of time to soak up the heritage of this wonder of the world.

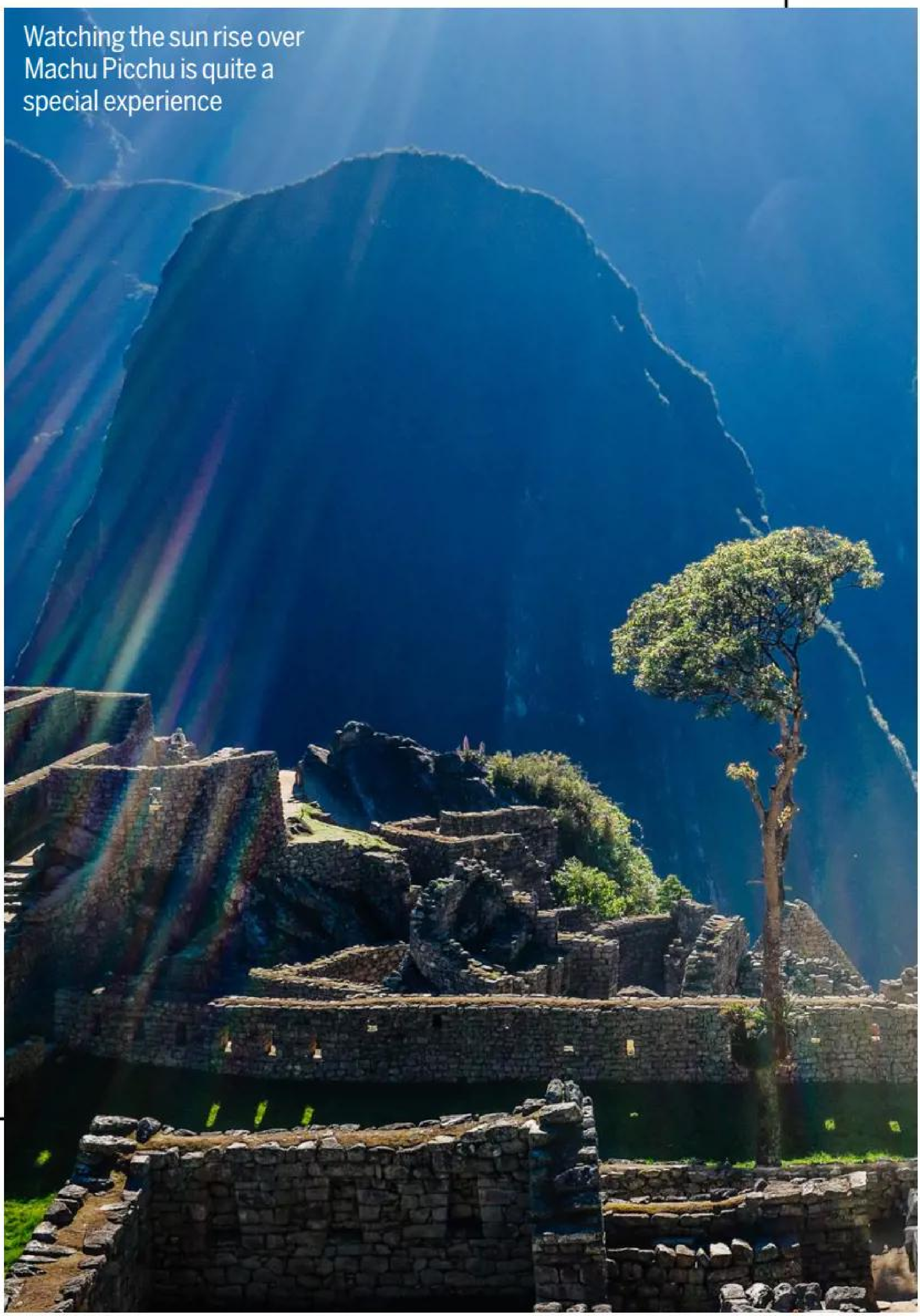
Cuzco

Once the capital of the Inca Empire, Cuzco is still the beating heart of Andean culture, and an ancient town that should not be missed. Cuzco is also the famous launching point for many trips to Machu Picchu. One of the many reasons for this is to allow travellers to grow accustomed to the altitude, as the city itself sits at 3,399 metres (11,152 feet). It is also the oldest city in Peru, and provides a mix of Inca and Spanish architecture. If shopping is what you are after, then Cuzco is a mecca for textiles, jewellery and art. Make sure you visit the city's main market, San Pedro Mercado Central, and soak up the culinary culture and colour.



Follow in the footsteps of the Inca Empire as you walk along the steps to the famous Sun Gate

TO SUN GATE
A INTIPUNKU
TO MACHUPICCHU MOUNTAIN
MONTAÑA MACHUPICCHU



Watching the sun rise over Machu Picchu is quite a special experience

AUSTRA NEW ZE & THE PACIFIC ISLAND

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92

GREAT BARRIER REEF

Australia's natural wonder is equally stunning from above and below the water

The Great Barrier Reef is the largest living structure on the planet, and the only one visible from space. It stretches over 2,300 kilometres (1,429 miles) off the coast of Queensland, Australia, from Cairns up to the Daintree rainforest, and is made up of 3,000 coral reefs and hundreds of islands. Legendary in its reputation, this wonder of the natural world attracts more than 1.5 million visitors a year.

There's such a huge diversity of marine species in and around the Great Barrier Reef that it was named a World Heritage Site in 1981 for its scientific significance. Whether you're viewing it from a glass-bottomed boat or through a snorkel, the life on the reef is breathtaking. 2,000 species of fish dart between bright anemones and lurk on the seabed; sharks drift over the branching coral; and manta rays glide serenely through the water. Seabirds like pelicans fly overhead, and lucky travellers can spot dolphins and whales leaping from the waves.

Experienced divers are spoilt for choice, with seemingly endless reef to explore. The Yongala, a steamer sunk by a cyclone in 1911, now lies 28 metres (92 feet) below the surface and is considered one of the best wreck dives in the world. Those not so used to life in a wetsuit needn't feel left out – snorkeling in the crystal-clear waters is an exhilarating activity available to anyone comfortable in the water. Even visitors happier just looking at the water can experience the reef close up; ReefHQ is the largest living reef aquarium on the planet, with the coral ecosystem replicated on land.

Of course, the best way to see the whole reef is from the air. Helicopters and light aircraft leave from Cairns and Airlie Beach aiports to offer breathtaking views of the whole coast. For the daredevils, there's the opportunity to leave the comfort of the plane and skydive over the Whitsunday Islands.

The Whitsundays, 74 idyllic islands scattered across the turquoise water of the reef, are high on the to-do lists of many visitors. Landing at the Whitsunday Coast airport near Proserpine, it's a 25-minute bus journey to Airlie Beach. This resort town is a hive of activity with beaches, swimming areas, nightclubs and a marina full of boats ready to set sail for tours of the islands. Tours can last

An aerial view of coral, Heart Reef and the turquoise waters at Hardy Reef

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Pack plenty of suncream and a pair of sunglasses, and only swim where you're told it's safe to do so.

Best time to visit:

June to October (temperatures aren't too stifling)

Time zone:

UTC+10

CURRENCY

$

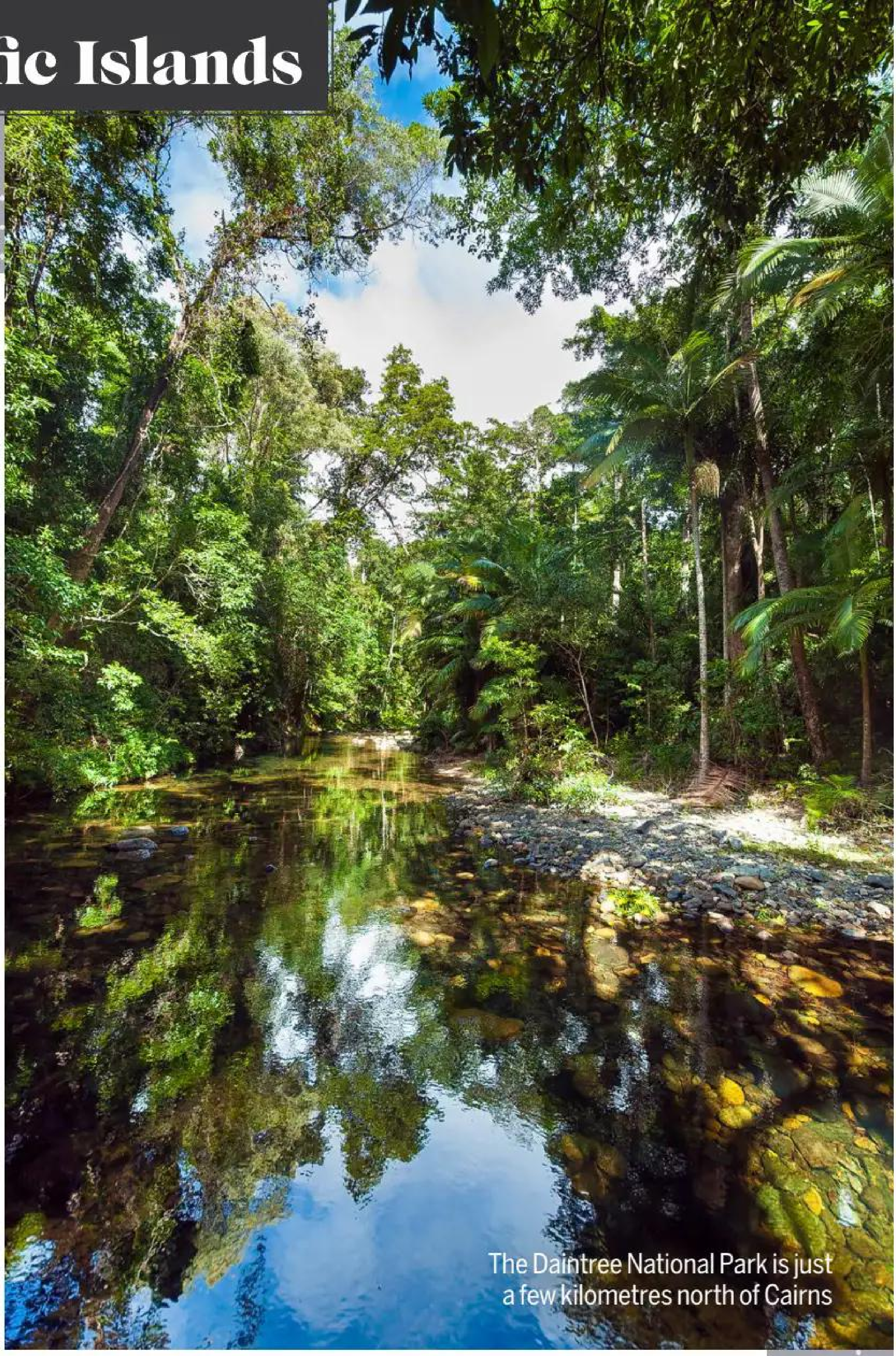
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.visitcairns.com.au
www.greatbarrierreef.org
www.daintreerainforest.com

The Great Barrier Reef is teeming with beauty

Go snorkelling or diving for a chance to see turtles and more



The Daintree National Park is just a few kilometres north of Cairns

See it up close

Diving and snorkelling in the waters of the Great Barrier Reef are wonderful experiences for both the seasoned explorer and those wanting to try it for the first time, and most tour operators will accommodate for both. If you're concerned about swimming through crowded water, don't worry – the reef is vast, and there are many locations for exploring what lies beneath, so you won't be swimming shoulder to shoulder with a stranger.

The water has comfortable temperatures all year round, but what you will see will vary throughout the year. For example, between June and November you have a greater chance of spotting whales.

If you are an experienced scuba diver and want to try something different, you should look into exploring the SS Yongala, a passenger ship that sank in 1911. Some operators may briefly pass by this, but there are others that offer a tour of the wreckage, so make sure you find the best tour operator to suit your needs.

> Of course, the best way to see the whole reef is from the air

a few hours or several days depending on your schedule and budget; overnight visitors can camp, stay in island lodges or let the waves send them to sleep in the cabin of a boat.

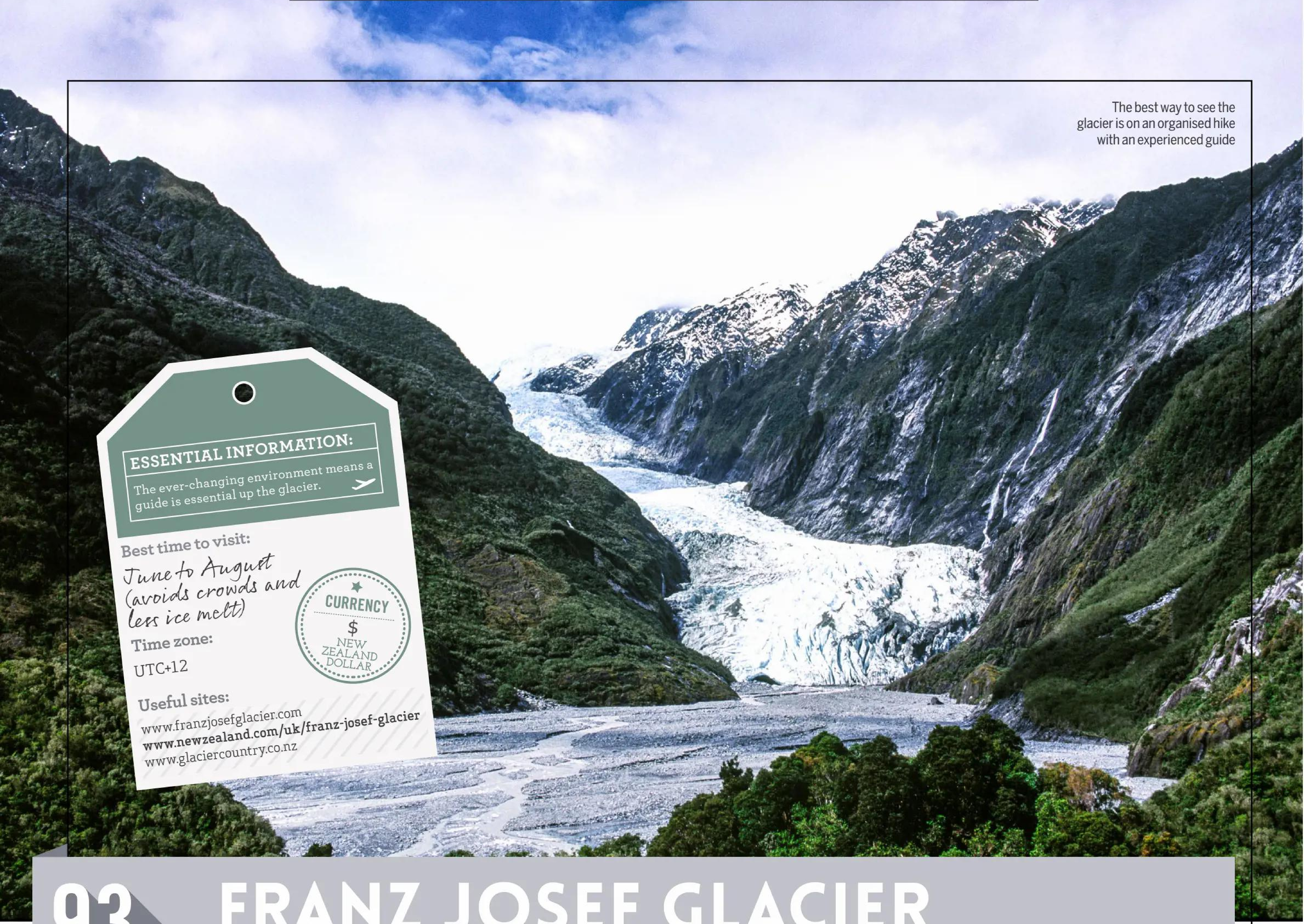
When you feel ready for a break from island-hopping and golden beaches, head inland to the Daintree Rainforest. Entering the dense jungle, teeming with unusual creatures and strange sounds, is like stepping into another world. It's home to some of Australia's unique animals such as possums, tree kangaroos and forest dragons. Tread quietly and you might even catch a glimpse of the world's third largest bird, the dinosaur-like cassowary.

If dangerous birds aren't your thing, Conway National Park behind Airlie Beach plays host to daintier birds like cockatoos and kingfishers. Rent some mountain bikes and you can fly through the rainforest alongside them.

Combining water and wilderness, Heron Island is a protected Marine National Park and the perfect place to spend a quiet few days soaking up the sun and marvelling at the nature. Plan a trip between November and March and you'll be able to watch turtles laying eggs and hatching on the beach.

The Great Barrier Reef sits at the top of millions of bucket lists, and with good reason. In case any more persuasion is needed, just remember this: Sir David Attenborough himself said that it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

From Airlie Beach, you can catch a boat to the reef



The best way to see the glacier is on an organised hike with an experienced guide

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

The ever-changing environment means a guide is essential up the glacier.

Best time to visit:

June to August (avoids crowds and less ice melt)

Time zone:

UTC+12

CURRENCY
$
NEW ZEALAND DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.franzjosefglacier.com
www.newzealand.com/uk/franz-josef-glacier
www.glaciercountry.co.nz

93

FRANZ JOSEF GLACIER

Visit the rock star of the glacier world on New Zealand's South Island

You might think that scaling a glacier is an activity best left to trained mountaineers equipped with crampons, pickaxes and layer upon layer of Gore-Tex. However, the Franz Josef glacier in New Zealand allows you to bust out your inner Edmund Hillary in the morning then be down at the beach by the afternoon. The 3,000-metre-high (9,842-foot-high) glacier is one of only three glaciers in New Zealand to be within a few hundred metres from the coastline – meaning this is an ideal holiday location for those wanting to mix high-adrenaline activities with a relaxing piña colada by the waves. Not only that, but the glacier descends into the stunning Westland Tai Poutini National Park, on the west coast of the South Island, which is home to some of New Zealand's rarest birds.

Franz Josef may not seem a particularly traditional Kiwi name, and that is because it isn't – it's Austrian. The glacier was first explored in 1865 by famed German explorer Julius von Haast, who named it after Austrian emperor Franz Josef I. The town surrounding the glacier took its name from the imposing natural wonder and the unique nature of the temperate glacier began to attract visitors.

As interesting as a tale about a German explorer naming a glacier in New Zealand after an Austrian emperor is, the traditional Maori tale is even more fascinating. The story goes that the snow maiden, Hine Hukatere, fell in love with a mortal man, Wawe. They ascended Aorangi – the home of the tribal gods – to ask for them to make her warm-blooded. However, the vengeful god of weather, Tawhirimatea, pushed Wawe off the mountain to his death. Hine Hukatere's tears then formed the glacier, known in the Maori tongue as Ka Roimata o Hine Hukatere or 'the frozen tears of Hine Hukatere'.

The history is fascinating, but it's the present that explorers are most interested in. You can hike to within 750 metres (2,460 feet) of the base and gaze upwards in awe at one of New Zealand's steepest glaciers. Alternatively, you can take a helicopter to the top of the glacier where you can stroll around the top – but watch out for deep snow that can swallow a tiny traveller – and gaze over the Tasman Sea or keep an eye out for birds in the spectacular rainforest. The icy, snowy glacier descends into a temperate rainforest, home to the kotuku, southern crested grebe and Okarito brown kiwi. Tours are available and highly recommended, as there are also hot flat pools to explore and Lake Matheson – known as the most photographed lake in New Zealand due to its reflective waters, so clearly not to be missed.

If you're a serious thrill-seeker, a full-blown glacier heli-hike is a must for a unique experience. Franz Josef Glacier moves up to 50 centimetres (20 inches) a day, but has been known to move as much as four metres (13 feet) a day – a speedy pace in the glacier world. The fast-moving nature of the ice mountain has created a network of caves, crevasses and tunnels that change daily, so no two glacier walks will be the same. So if you fancy a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience, Franz Josef Glacier has it all – an ever-changing landscape, a dense rainforest view and the sea just a few hundred metres away.

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SAMOA

Find a piece of paradise in the Pacific and live life the 'Samoan Way'

Fa'a Samoa – the Samoan Way, the way of life for the people who call this small Pacific Island nation home – makes Samoa one of the few traditional cultures that the outside world seems unable to spoil. Those lucky enough to be cast adrift in this island idyll are isolated from external influences by thousands of miles of ocean and a refreshingly simple approach to life.

The star of the show is the Pacific Island scenery: iridescent seas, white beaches, lush forests and crystal waterfalls. Among the highlights is To Sua Ocean Trench, a stunning volcanic complex consisting of two giant holes linked by a cave. One of the holes is now a deep pool enjoyed by local swimmers and tourists alike. Another popular place to take a dip is Afu Aau Falls, a spectacular waterfall that plunges into a sloping freshwater pool. What better way to exercise than swimming laps in a rainforest?

Samoa's population is split between two volcanic islands, the larger of which – Savai'i – is still active. Some of its surface is covered in cooled lava from a six-year eruption that began in 1905 and slowly buried whole villages underneath the slow but unstoppable trudge of the molten rock. Extinct craters, ancient peaks and black sands are constant reminders that you are standing on a shield volcano. The Alofaaga Blowholes, on the southern coast of the island, is where volcano and ocean meet – when waves break against the cliff, water shoots up old lava tubes to create spectacular fountains of spray.

The other island, Upolu, is home to three quarters of the population and the capital, Apia, a charming, tropical harbour and the best place to explore the Samoan Way. The Samoan Cultural Centre has demonstrations of authentic crafts and cooking – even traditional tattooing of brave tourists by a master artist. Apia is also the best place to take in a Fiafia night, a dinner performance of traditional songs and dancing by locals in colourful costume. This was the Samoa with which novelist Robert Louis Stevenson fell in love and spent his final years. Tour his home just outside the capital, now a museum, and visit his grave for spectacular views from the top of Mount Vaea.

For the most genuine experience of the Samoan Way, join one of the many available tours that include a village stop. The open and welcoming locals will be happy to let you wander freely and observe life in their fale – open houses with no walls, and blinds made from coconut palm fronds.

Samoans have kept the outside world at a distance, but it can't be avoided altogether. In 2011, the islands jumped across the international date line, skipping 30 December, to enable easier trade and commerce with Australia and New Zealand. High-speed internet is now available to smartphone-wielding teenagers, and multinational hotelier Sheraton has two resorts. It means that those who like their paradise unspoiled should go now and sample the Samoan Way before the rest of the world leaves too much of a mark.

Samoa's white beaches, green forests and azure seas are an unspoiled paradise

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Tipping is not practised or even expected in Samoa.

Best time to visit:

Aprilto October (to avoid Monsoon season)

Time zone:

UTC+14

CURRENCY

WS$

TALA

Useful sites:

www.samoa.travel
www.samoagovt.ws
www.polynesia.com/culture-of-samoa

Admittedly, Lake Hillier isn't the only pink lake in the world, but it does have rather unique qualities

95

LAKE HILLIER

The pretty-in-pink Australian lake that stuns tourists and scientists

Think of a lake. You're probably imagining a cool, blue expanse of water. Maybe even turquoise or aquamarine. You certainly won't be imagining water the colour of a flamingo, but that is the sight that would greet you if you visit the unique and spectacular Lake Hillier. Situated on Middle Island, just off the coast of Western Australia, the lake is a bright-pink colour all year round, for reasons scientists still can't quite agree on. Some believe it is due to a bacteria found in the water, while others think it's caused by Dunaliella salina microalgae. One thing everyone can agree on, however, is that it looks both bizarre and incredible – especially as it's just metres from the Pacific Ocean that remains determinedly and traditionally blue, resulting in an amazing contrast when viewed from above.

Lake Hillier isn't the only pink lake in the world, but it is unique as the one that retains its colour even when the water is removed and bottled. Discovered by British explorer Matthew Flinders in 1802, Lake Hillier was named after William Hillier – one of Flinders' fellow HMS Investigator sailors who had sadly died of dysentery. Lake Hillier, which is on the small side at around 600 by 250 metres (1,968 by 820 feet), was mined for its salt for six years, but mining stopped when it was discovered that the salt was too toxic for human consumption. Middle Island is now a nature reserve, with only a limited number of tourists allowed onto the island. One of the best ways to see Lake Hillier in all its glory is by helicopter, as it is at its most vibrant from the air and you can fully appreciate the contrast with the Pacific.

Another option is a cruise from Esperance – the closest town to Middle Island. Now, the big question that all once-in-a-lifetime-experience seekers will want to know: can you swim in a bubblegum lake for that ultimate Instagram snap? You can, but the Esperance Visitor Centre says you probably wouldn't really want to due to the high salt levels and shallow depth. The water has been tested and it is perfectly safe to swim in. The microalgae is harmless; there aren't any creatures that will try and have a nibble on you, and the pink won't stain your body. The salt levels are comparable to the Dead Sea in the Middle East, which is also perfectly safe to swim in, but it wouldn't make for the most satisfying swim ever – so probably just dip in for the photo opportunity and out again.

Whichever way you decide to experience the incredible Lake Hillier – via land, sea or sky – this is a sight that no self-respecting traveller can miss out on. Where else can you see nature's daiquiri nestled among the trees of a gorgeous Australian nature reserve and get your friends scrabbling to find what filter you used to create that unbelievable shot?

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Middle Island can only be visited using a licenced tour operator.

Best time to visit:

March to May (for the best weather)

Time zone:

UTC+8

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.australia.com/en-gb/places/perth-and-surrounds/guide-to-pink-lake.html
www.esperancecruises.com.au/lakehillier
www.goldfieldsairservices.com/esperance-scenic-flights

96

ROTORUA

Work up a sweat then soothe your aching muscles in New Zealand's best-of-both-worlds town

The majority of trips fall into one of three categories: relaxation, adventure or culture. You're usually either chilling on the beach, risking your life in the name of fun, or exploring an interesting historical or cultural relic. But how about a trip where you can do all three within the confines of the same town, with each experience rightfully earning the tag of best in the world? If that interests you, then welcome to Rotorua. This town on New Zealand's North Island boasts the very best in relaxing thermal springs and mud baths, and one of the greatest mountain-biking trails in the world, plus it is steeped in centuries of fascinating Maori culture.

Rotorua sits right on the Pacific Ring of Fire – a horseshoe-shaped string of volcanoes and seismic activity where two tectonic plates collide. While that may sound dangerous, it's actually a huge benefit. Hot gas from the Earth's mantle squeezes between the plates to heat thermal pools for a wonderful natural hot tub. A trip to Rotorua isn't complete without a visit to the Waikite Valley Thermal Pools. 35-degree-Celsius (95-degree-Fahrenheit) water from the Te Manaroa spring cascades into ten thermal pools, which are emptied and cleaned daily for a safe, satisfying experience. If you want more of a deep cleanse, Hell's Gate is the place for you. It is New Zealand's most active geothermal site, and home to world-famous thermal mud baths, which can ease arthritis, burns or simply exfoliate your skin. You must also visit the sulphur baths, which have great healing properties for your skin. You may be a bit whiffy for a while, but your body will thank you. While you're there, also visit the Southern Hemisphere's biggest thermal waterfall. Basically wherever you go in Rotorua, it's hot hot hot!

It is especially handy to have so many relaxing and restorative places to visit, given how many high-octane activities there are around the area. The forests of Rotorua are perfect for mountain biking, with the trails around Whakarewarewa Forest among the best eight tracks in the world, according to adrenaline oracle Red Bull. If you want to experience the wonders of the forest trees without the risk of hitting them very hard, take a hike or canopy tour and gaze in wonder at the giant redwoods. If your appetite for unique experiences still hasn't been satisfied, try OGO Rotorua, the world's longest zorbing track.

Last but not least, you can experience authentic Maori culture around every turn. Te Puia, Mitai Village and Tamaki Village all provide culture vultures with a snapshot of the real Maori New Zealand, with traditional weaving, carving, food and, of course, Maori music and dancing. Te Puia is also known for the Pohutu Geyser, which spurts boiling water at least 20 times a day. Rotorua truly is the jack of all trades and the master of all as well. It has a little bit of everything you could possibly want for the all-round holiday. For the ultimate package, Rotorua is a must-visit.

Whakarewarewa Geyser at Te Puia thermal park

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Terume Hot Springs Resort operates a no-swimsuit policy – so adults only!

Best time to visit:
December (for the Mudtopia Festival)

Time zone:
UTC+13

CURRENCY
$ NEW ZEALAND DOLLAR

Useful sites:
www.rotoruanz.com/visit/home.aspx
www.newzealand.com/uk/rotorua
www.whakarewarewa.com

97

SYDNEY

Rich sunshine, arts, culture and wildlife make for a wealthy experience down under

When visiting Australia, there is no place more vibrant and more exciting to be than its capital city of Sydney. Depending on the time of year you visit, there is always a multitude of things to see and do, from the golden sands of Bondi Beach in the height of summer to the world's most impressive firework display to see in the New Year. However, if you find yourself in the neighbourhood on any given day and are in need of something fun, then you will not be disappointed by the sights and scenes of Sydney life.

To really experience the beauty of the city, head straight to Sydney Harbour Bridge. The best way to access and experience the majestic structure, which stands at 504 metres (1,654 feet) tall and stretches from the Sydney central business district (CBD) to the North Shore, is on foot. When there, you will find the best views accessed via the southeastern climb to Pylon Lookout or via the Sydney Harbour Bridge climb, which has a summit of 134 metres (440 feet). While the views in the day from the bridge are beyond belief, taking a trip at night is a guaranteed way to see one of the most breathtaking views in the entire world. If heights don't exactly thrill you then not to worry, the bridge offers a variety of options when it comes to your ascension. Whichever you choose, there is plenty to admire.

One of the sights most obvious from the bridge is the world-famous Sydney Opera House. Designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon and founded in 1973, this World Heritage-listed building is Australia's most famous landmark. Either choose one of the 40 shows put on every week to attend in order to experience the space in all its glory, take a one-hour guided tour, or pay for a two-hour backstage tour (which departs at 7am and includes breakfast in the Green Room as well as an unlimited access-all-areas pass so you can explore the building). Please note that ongoing renovation work, which is scheduled until 2021, may disrupt your tour. For architecture enthusiasts, a visit to St Mary's Cathedral is a must-see, especially around Christmas when the building becomes the platform for impressive light displays. Stunning features of the Gothic Revival cathedral, which was modelled after Paris's Notre Dame, include a beautiful terrazzo-tiled floor in the crypt, and stained-glass windows. For an even more heavenly experience, visit on a Sunday at around 10.30am, when the famous choir sings.

Lots of amazing adventures in Sydney will burn straight through your wallet, so if you're looking for free tours and experiences, then you can certainly find something to take the pressure off the purse strings. Every day at 10.30am (except on public holidays), a free tour commences at the Royal Botanic Garden. In and among the varying plants and flowers, you will spot beautiful birds and butterflies, as well as reptiles and fish. It is worth noting that all reptiles are protected by law, and in Sydney many native species have poisonous bites, so check safety information on what to do if you think you have been bitten before you head off for a trek. The Art Gallery of New South Wales is also free and worth a visit

> With more than 100 beaches in Sydney, you'll be spoilt for choice

The Sydney Opera House has a number of options available to tourists that allow them to experience this magnificent building both inside and out

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

The city centre is just a 20-minute train or taxi ride from the airport.

Best time to visit:

September to November or March to May (for more comfortable temperatures and less tourists)

Time zone:

UTC+11

CURRENCY

$

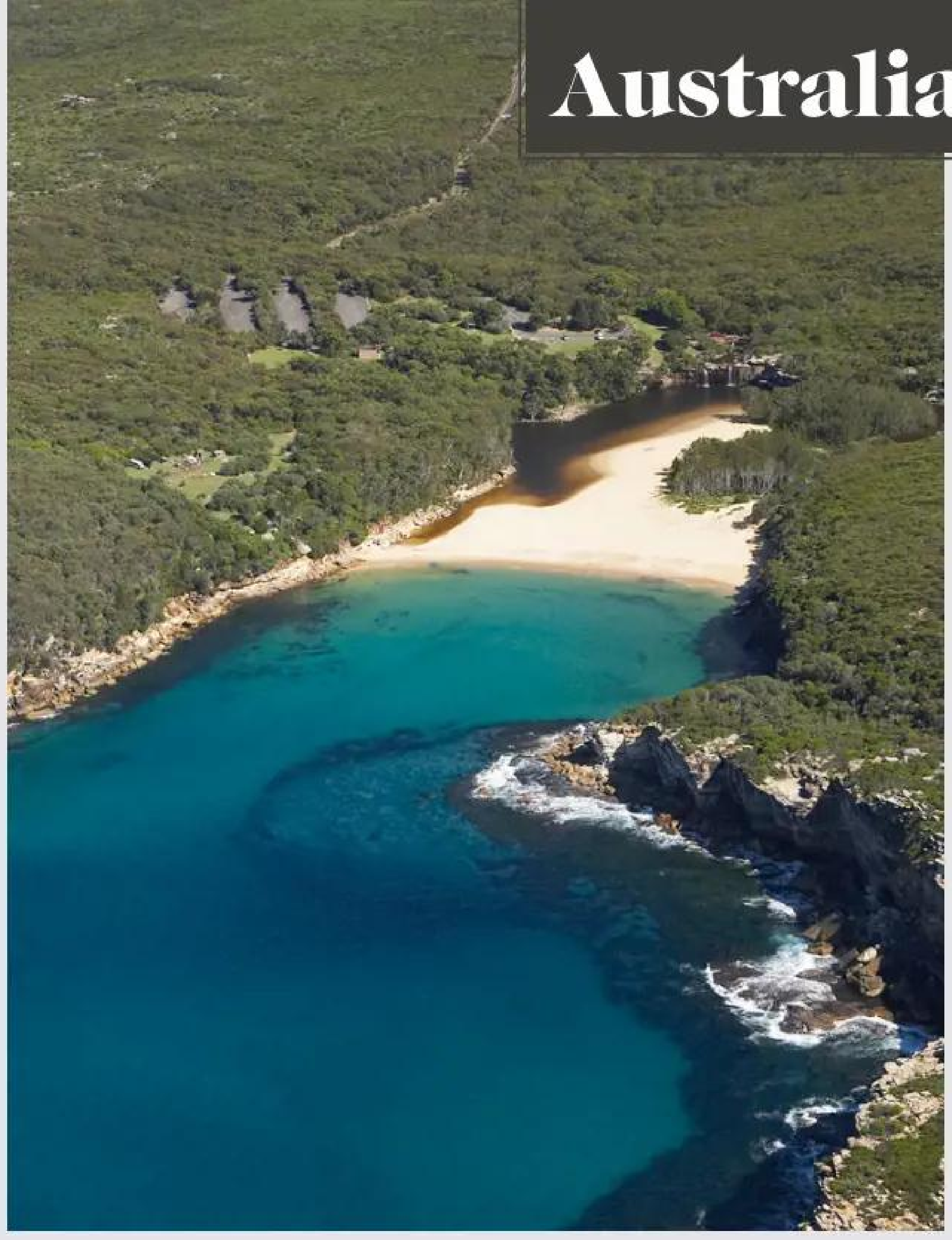
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites:

uk.sydney.com

www.sydneyoperahouse.com

www.bridgeclimb.com



Sydney has something to offer every traveller

Best secluded beaches

RESOLUTE BEACH
This gorgeous private beach is a must-see while you're in town. Accessed via the Resolute Loop Trail in the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park from the Resolute Picnic area, you will find glistening emerald waters with panoramic views of Pittwater and the Barrenjoey Headland.

MAITLAND BAY
One of the most secluded beaches in Sydney, Maitland Bay has plenty of opportunities to find a quiet spot. Accessed via a popular bushtrail in Bouddi National Park known as the Maitland Bay Track, low tides on the eastern side of the beach will reveal the remains of the SS Maitland shipwreck that ran aground in May 1898.

WATTAMOLLA BEACH
Located along the famous Royal Coastal Walk in the Royal National Park, you will discover Wattamolla Beach. Featuring a tranquil lagoon, waterfall and crystal-clear waters, it is an amazing spot for snorkellers, kayaking and a cooling dip.

for travelling art lovers. An impressive building that looks like something straight out of Greek mythology, it is home to more than 30 temporary and passing exhibitions every year, as well as its regular collections of artwork.

With more than 100 beaches in Sydney to visit, you will be spoilt for choice. To experience the hustle and bustle of sunbathers, surfers and tourist hot spots, head to Bondi Beach or Coogee Beach, but if you fancy delving off the beaten track to somewhere quieter, a number of private and secluded beaches are accessible around Sydney, such as the Resolute Beach in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. If you have a few hours to kill or even a whole day, then the Manly to Spit coastal walk is well worth the effort. With a multitude of different experiences packed into this trek through a variety of atmospheres, from lush bushland and scenic harbourside trails, you can experience a relaxed swim at Castle Rock Beach to the party scene at Reef Bay. The experience can be done from Manly Beach to Spit Bridge, but there is no law that says you have to do it in that order. Why not try it back-to-front for a unique experience of Australia's coast?

Sydney has one of the most impressive wildlife experiences on offer across the world. If you happen to visit between May and August then you will be joined by 20,000 humpback whales who are heading north via the New South Wales coastline towards the warmer waters, as winter temperatures have them searching for more suitable waters to mate and give birth in. In the summer months, they return to the southern waters with their calves to feed in Antarctic waters where food is bountiful. Unfortunately for tourists, legislation means that nowhere in New South Wales will permit the handling of koala bears, however Sydney Zoo is a great place to observe them. If you are pushed for time to see the wide spectrum of wildlife down under, under the zoo's roof you will find koalas, wallabies, kangaroos, crocodiles, wombats and more. Another great place to find a collection of wildlife is Taronga Zoo. A 12-minute ferry ride from Circular Quay, this bushy harbour hillside park features all the native Australian critters as well as numerous imported guests, all of which have harbour views and a home that is an oasis of animal care and welfare.

However long you visit Sydney for, there is so much to experience, and we can't blame you if after a taste you come back time and time again for more.

When the busy pace of Sydney gets too much, step inside the tranquil and impressive St Mary's Cathedral, located across from Hyde Park

Do you dare to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge? Hook on your harness and allow guides to take your trip to new and exciting heights

98

ULURU

Discover one of Australia's most famous natural landmarks in all its jaw-dropping glory

In the middle of a flat, dry desert stands something extraordinary. At 348 metres (1,141 feet) high, and rising 863 metres (2,831 feet) above sea level is Uluru, the only change in the surface level for miles around. With the nearest town, Alice Springs, being a four-and-a-half-hour drive away, Uluru-Kata Tjuta Park, where Uluru sits, is peaceful; and as the scorching Australian sun hits it, the orange and scarlet sandstone seems to glow. It's easy to see why it is considered a spiritual place for Australia's Aboriginal population.

But there's more to Uluru than its appearance. Many people choose to walk around the base of it – that's a walk with a distance of 9.4 kilometres (5.8 miles), which involves tranquil waterholes and hidden caves that are just waiting to be peered into. It also provides the opportunity to discover some stunning Aboriginal rock art that's over 5,000 years old. Many of the routes are wheelchair-accessible, and if walking is not quite your style, there are companies offering tours on motorbikes and camels, so there's no excuse not to explore!

For the more adventurous, some companies offer skydiving experiences. Launching from the resort that's been built near Uluru, a skydive with a qualified instructor gives breathtaking views of the desert, bush and, of course, Uluru. It's the perfect way to see Northern Territory's most famous landmark and really take in the scale of it.

If what you're interested in is the local culture, there are plenty of ways to discover more about the Aboriginal way of life. From tours to an information centre, it's impossible not to come away knowing more about Anangu, the name given to the central Australian tribes.

Make sure you keep an eye out for the local wildlife, too. While you're most likely to see some of the 178 species of bird and 73 types of reptiles, see if you can spot any of the 21 different mammals and four types of frogs, too. Lizards and snakes are the most common, but kangaroos and dingos can be seen from time to time – you're in the Australian outback, after all.

After a long day trekking around the rock and checking out the local wildlife, why not spend the slightly cooler evening having a picnic in the park? As the Sun sets over the sacred monolith, you will be treated to a magnificent view as the sky changes hue and makes Uluru a silhouette against its backdrop. With such jaw-droppingly beautiful views, you will never want to go home!

Uluru stands tall as the highest point for miles around

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Climbing Uluru is no longer permitted by the authorities as it is considered sacred by Aboriginals.

Best time to visit:

April to October

Time zone:

UTC+9:30

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites:

www.parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru
www.northernterritory.com/gb/en/uluru-and-surrounds/destinations/uluru-ayers-rock
www.uluru-australia.com

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WAITOMO CAVES

Discover one of nature's most spectacular light shows deep underground in New Zealand

As you stand inside the peaceful darkness of the Waitomo Caves, a galaxy of lights twinkle above your head. It may look like a starry night's sky visible below ground, but these beautiful illuminations are created by thousands of glowworms that call the caves home.

These tiny insects, known as Arachnocampa luminosa, are native to New Zealand, and use a chemical reaction to emit a blue-tinged glow from their backsides. The light helps them to attract their prey, which they then catch in a sticky web of silk threads that hang down from the cave ceiling. Their spectacular natural light show has made the Waitomo Caves one of the North Island's most popular attractions, but it's not the only reason to visit.

The cave system itself is also fascinating to explore, either on foot or by boat. A network of underground streams have been carving its passageways and chambers out of the soft limestone rock for millions of years, inspiring the name Waitomo, which is Maori for 'stream that flows into the hole under the ground'. Inside, dripping water has crafted impressive natural sculptures that hang down from the ceiling and rise up from the floor, and the walls themselves are made from glistening fossilised sea shells that were once part of the sea bed.

Knowledgeable local guides can take you on tours of the three main caves at Waitomo, providing a fascinating insight into their history, geology and cultural significance to the Maori people of the North Island.

The Aranui Cave is the smallest, and as it does not have a river running through it, can be explored entirely on foot. Its ceiling is richly decorated with stalactites in amazing shades of pale brown, pink and white, and you may even spot one of its only residents: the native cave weta insect that has been around since the age of the dinosaurs.

The longest cave at Waitomo, the Ruakuri Cave, can also be explored on foot, starting with a long spiral ramp that takes you deep underground. As you marvel at the shawl-like limestone formations and glowworms overhead, your walk is sound-tracked by thundering underground waterfalls in the distance.

The third and most popular cave is the Waitomo Glowworm Cave, which features two levels that are 16 metres (52 feet) apart. The upper level is dry and features several stunning formations including the Tomo, a vertical limestone shaft carved by a spectacular waterfall that only flows during heavy rains. This leads down to the lower level where a boat ride takes you through the Cathedral, a 14-metre-high (46-foot-high) cavern with incredible acoustics, to the Glowworm Grotto where you are surrounded by a starry light display that's reflected in the calm waters beneath you.

You can choose to take as many of these tours as you like, but if you're seeking more of a thrill, you might prefer to go black water rafting instead. This gives you the chance to abseil and zipline through the caves, climb and jump off underground waterfalls, and then float beneath the glowworms on rubber tubes for a truly breathtaking subterranean adventure.

The Waitomo Glowworm Caves were first explored in 1887 by a local Maori chief and an English surveyor

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:

Photography and video recording is strictly forbidden inside the caves.

Best time to visit:

November to April (for warmer conditions)

Time zone:

UTC+12

Useful sites:

www.waitomo.com
www.waitomocaves.com
www.newzealand.com

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100 Tahiti

One of the largest islands in French Polynesia, it's hardly surprising that this is home to the nation's capital of Pape'ete. With a permanent population of more than 150,000 people, Tahiti is buzzing with life and culture. Its economy is not purely based on tourism, so you will see ordinary Tahitians living and working, and can really immerse yourself in authentic local life. Check out the colourful market in Pape'ete, and grab yourself some fresh produce.

The island is rich in history, and prominent characters from its past include Captain Cook, the mutineers from the ship Bounty, and Queen Pomare IV, who ruled over the island for 50 years. You can pour over artefacts relating to Tahitian history at the island's museum, which is dedicated to preserving Polynesian culture.

Or, you can continue to enjoy the stunning beaches and landscapes – Tahiti is famous for its unique black-sand beaches. The possibilities are endless.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION:
There's no public transport, so hire a car or bike.

Best time to visit:
November or April (to get good weather without the crowds)

Time zone:
Various

Useful sites:
tahititourisme.uk/en-gb
www.boraboraislandguide.com
www.tahiti.com

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FRENCH POLY

Thousands of miles away from the nearest land, French Polynesia is the perfect Pacific retreat

Picture paradise – you know what it looks like. Quiet, white-sand beaches with coconut palms lazily draping over the sands, their leaves pointing towards crystal-clear, turquoise waters. It might be a cliché, but you know you'd go there in a heartbeat.

To reach magical places like this, many holidaymakers head for Hawaii, the Caribbean, or even the islands of South East Asia. Unsurprisingly, not many people think of France – but their overseas territory of French Polynesia is one of the most stunning places on Earth. Home to six archipelagos, including the islands of Bora Bora, Tahiti and the relatively unspoilt Marquesas Islands, you'll find beauty everywhere you look. Island-hopping throughout French Polynesia is something every traveller should try out on an adventure across the Pacific.

Originally colonised by great Polynesian explorers, it's thought that these islands were some of the last places on the planet to be settled by humans. When Polynesian settlers came to the area, they built highly advanced and interconnected societies on the islands. These survived for more than a thousand years, and when Spanish, French, Portuguese and British sailors came through the area, they took note of what they found. But that didn't stop Europeans from trying to enforce Christianity on the population, and as a result conflict between the Europeans and native Polynesians broke out.

French missionaries were particularly prevalent in the area, and in one skirmish in 1838, the French government sent a warship to protect its citizens. This was the start of a long and protracted war between the two peoples, with France ultimately winning out and officially taking over the area in 1889.

Although French Polynesia's faraway nature is certainly a large part of its charm, it does mean that it will take you a fair amount of time (and money) to get there. From Europe, the most common routes go via Los Angeles, and will take more than 24 hours in travel time. You'll fly into Pape'ete, on Tahiti, as it is the only international airport in the country. Make sure you do your research to see if you can find cheaper deals flying via anywhere else, such as New Zealand.

With a wealth of islands to explore, you'll want to plan your trip carefully, so you can make the most of all the area has to offer. The most easily accessible islands from outside are the Society Islands, and they're also the ones that cater best to travellers, as the major destinations of Tahiti and Bora Bora form part of this group.

But even beyond those two treasures, the Society Islands are a real jewel. Most of the islands here have small airports, making island-hopping quick and simple, but you can look into doing it the old fashioned way and take ferry boats between them. From Tahiti, Mo'orea is the easiest island to reach by boat, with journeys taking between half an hour to an hour. You'll

French Polynesia has hundreds of islands and atolls, many of which feature awesome scenery and incredible snorkelling

NESIA

still find those trademark Tahitian bungalows sitting above shallow, blue lagoons there, but head inland a little to explore the striking green mountains that poke up against the skyline.

If being surrounded by nature is your idea of heaven, go to the little island of Huahine. As well as abundant fruit plants, such as watermelon, breadfruit, coconut, banana and even vanilla, you'll find beautiful white tiaré flowers growing wild and free. The wildlife here is also second to none – if you want a chance to see a rainbow of fish and corals, put your snorkel mask on and dive into the lagoon.

The Marquesas Islands also have a wide variety of things to see and do, but you'll have to be quite intrepid to go there. 3,000 miles away from the nearest land mass – Mexico – it's quite the unspoilt paradise. These volcanic islands feature some of the most spectacular scenery in the entire world, including the Vaipo waterfall on Nuku Hiva, with a sheer 350-metre (1,148-foot) drop – making it one of the tallest waterfalls in the world. It's also home to one of the richest cultures in the entire area, so if you're keen to learn more about this ancient civilisation, be sure to chat to one of the locals. Ask them about traditional Polynesian dances – it's so much more than hula skirts and lei garlands.

The other island groups are far less accessible, and their tourism potential hasn't been seriously delved into yet. The Gambier Islands, despite their appearance of perfect peace, were once used as a nuclear testing ground for French atomic weapons. Although their use has been banned since the end of the Cold War, the residents complain about the impact fallout is still having. But if you're drawn to adventure, the Gambier's main island of Mangareva might appeal – you can fly there from Tahiti, but other international visitors would be a rare sight indeed on the island.

Known around the world for their beautiful beaches and friendly locals, French Polynesia rightly earns its spot on your (probably very long) list of places to go. And if you give it a chance, we're sure it will win your heart, too.

> *Island hopping is something every traveller should try out*

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Bora Bora

It's been in countless movies and graced many a computer screensaver, so we're sure you've seen it before. Bora Bora is the iconic mountain island, surrounded by a gorgeous lagoon and bordered by a fantastic reef.

Known for its luxury hotels, Bora Bora is definitely one of the most expensive islands to visit, but it's perfect for honeymooners looking to splash out on the trip of a lifetime. There's a plethora of accommodation options, but the most iconic are the over-water bungalows, which start from around £500/$650 per night if you're looking at one of the major international chains.

As well as being romantic, Bora Bora is an extremely fun place to be, so get out there and enjoy some snorkelling and scuba diving in the lagoon. Alternatively, pump up your adrenaline by trying out something a little more exhilarating, such as water sports, or hiring a speedboat – which you can drive around all by yourself.

> “ONCE A YEAR, GO SOMEPLACE YOU’VE NEVER BEEN BEFORE”
>
> Dalai Lama

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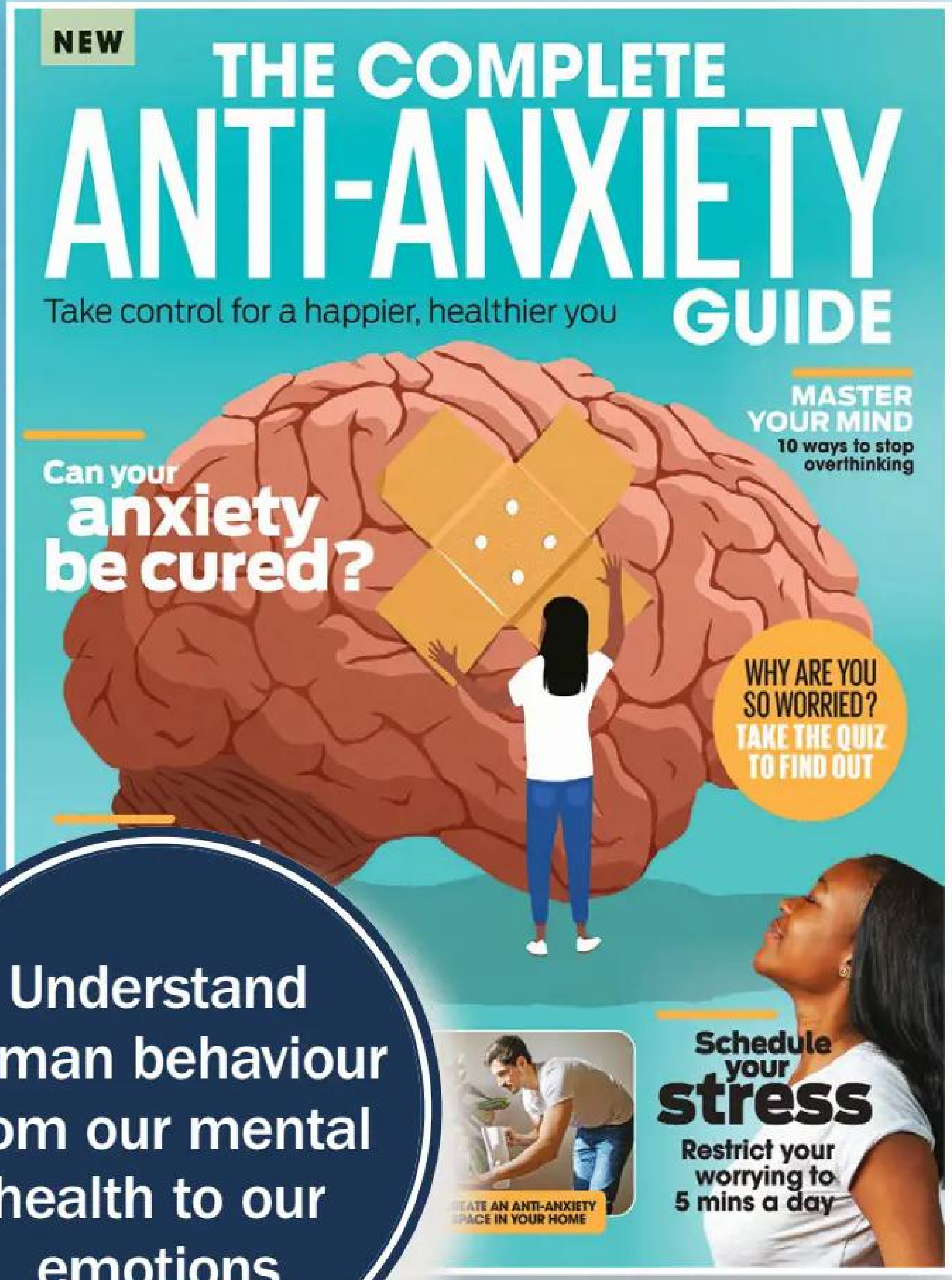
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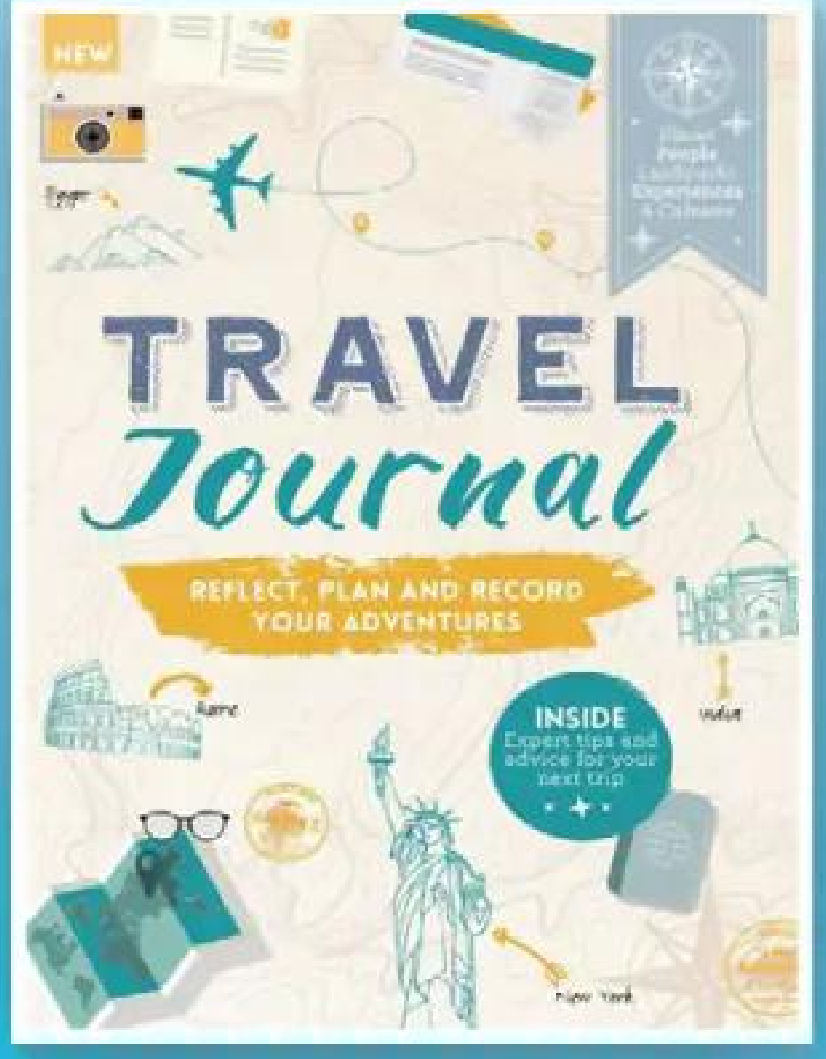
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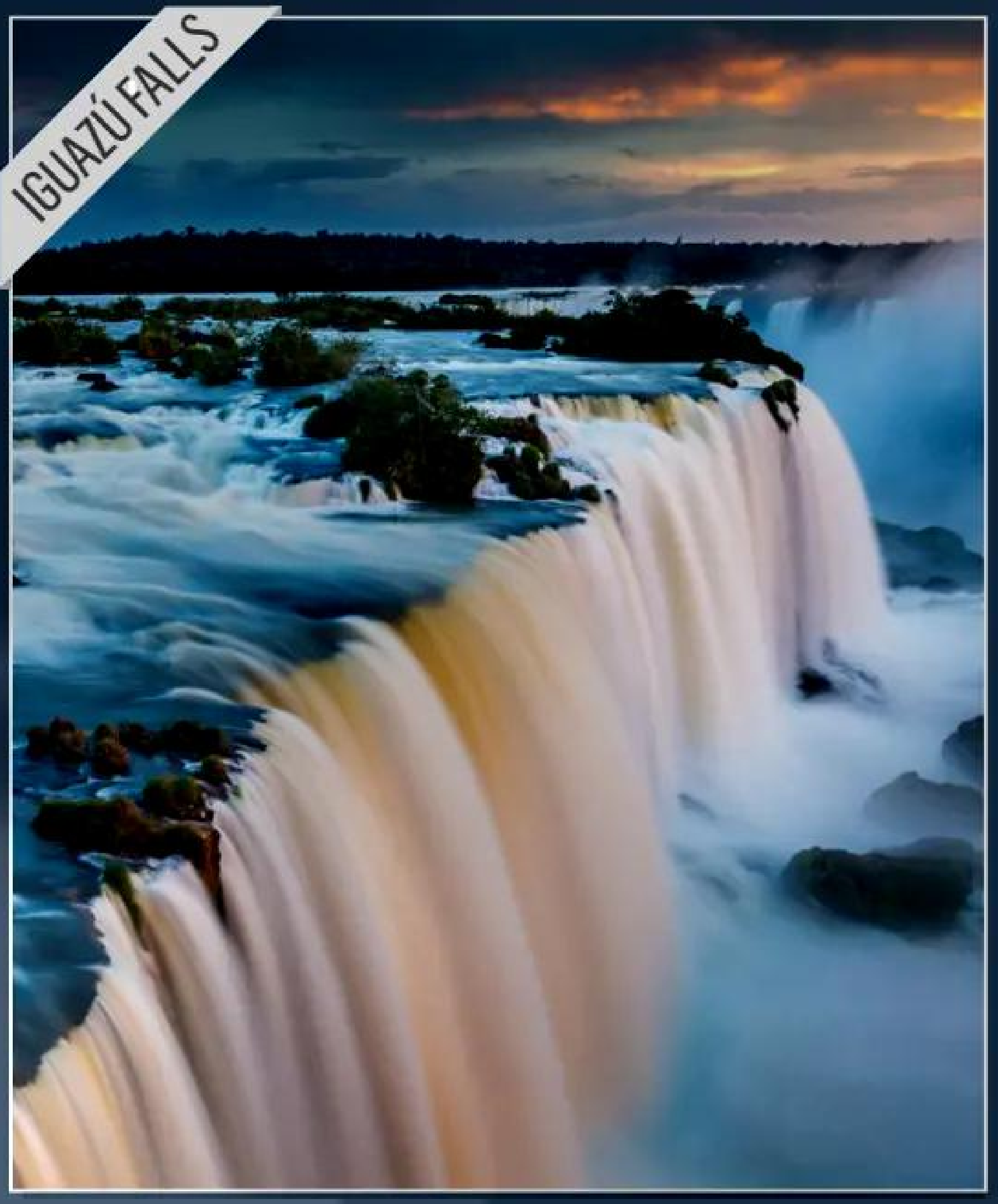
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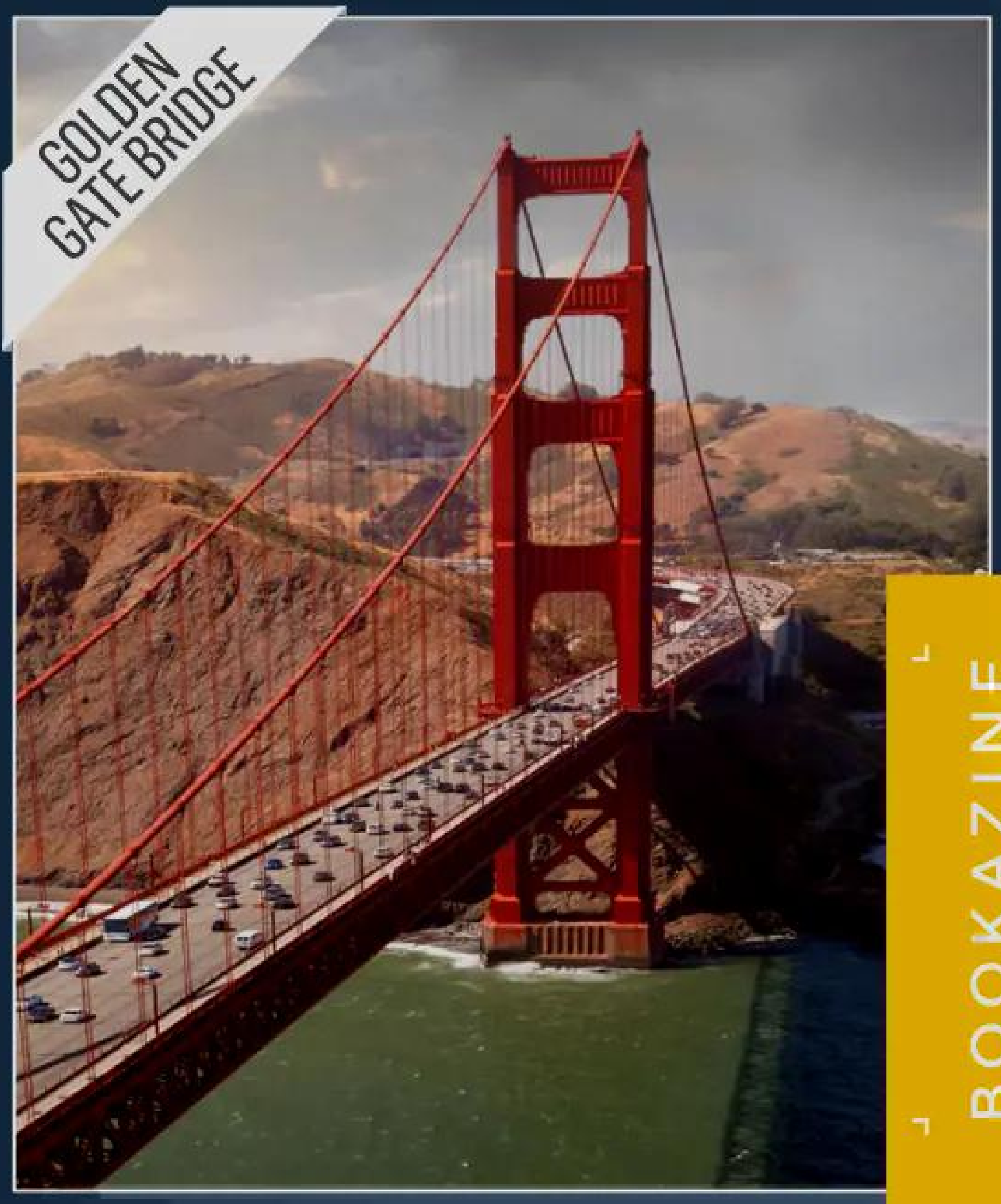
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